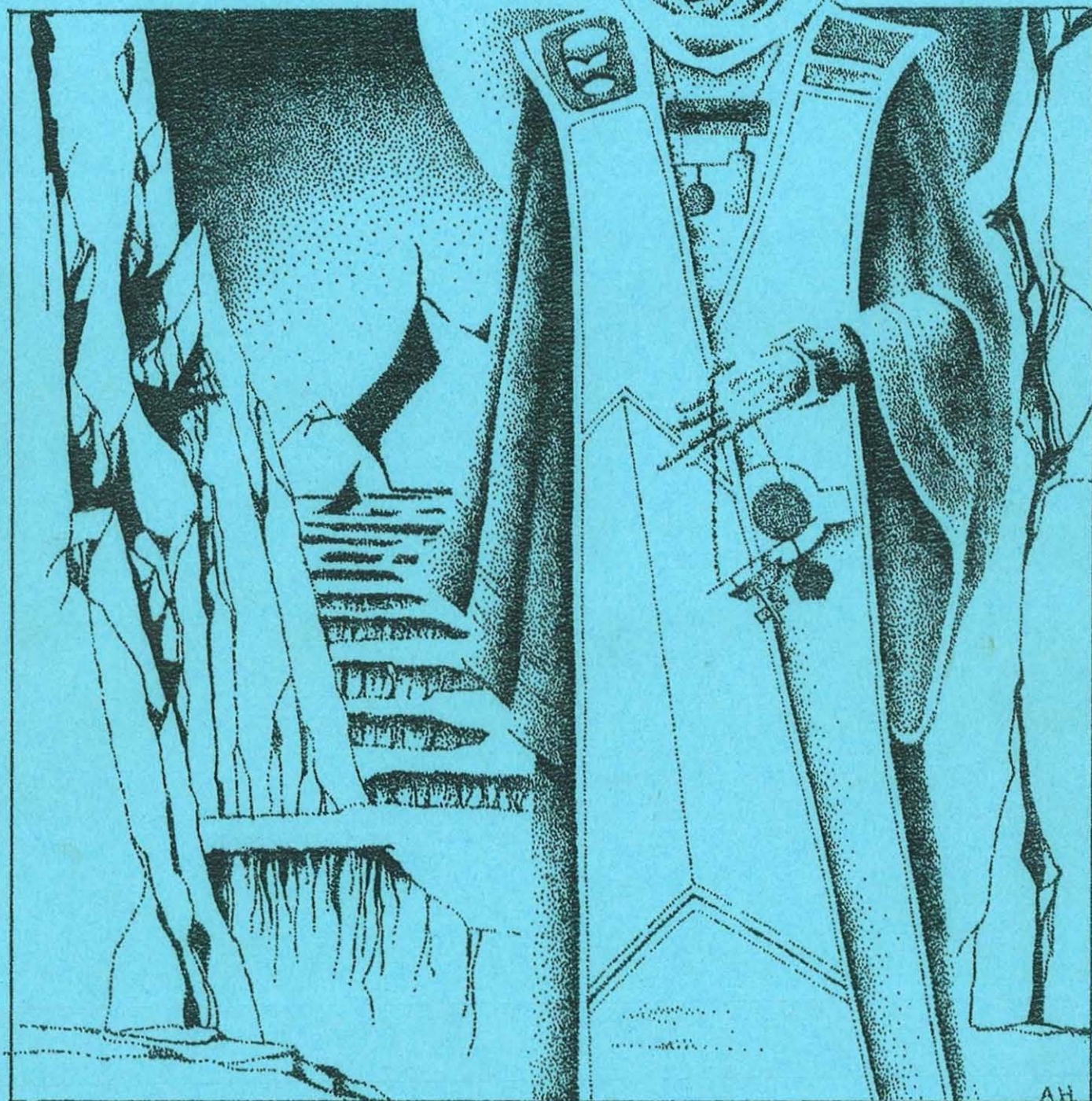


ScoTpress

ENTERPRISE -



LOG ENTRIES 51

a STAR TREK
fanzine

- contents -

Superman	by Doreen DaBinett	P 3
The Journey Home	by Vicki Richards	P 12
Be There	by Lorraine Goodison	P 13
Snow Leave	by Linda Watt	P 14
A New Beginning	by Liz Butler	P 23
Twenty-Third Century Destiny	by Vicki Richards	P 29
Game of Deceit	by Lorraine Goodison	P 30
To Find A Home	by Karen Hayden	P 53
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A Scotpress publication

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Enterprise - Log Entries 51 is available from

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6 Craigmill Cottages

Strathmartine

by Dundee

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October 1982

Scotpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona.

Hello, and welcome to Enterprise - Log Entries 51 - a mere fleabite to put out after the mammoth 50th edition. (The people who said 'You'll put out an even bigger one for No. 100' can come and do it for us!)

We have one slight problem with this issue. The name of the artist who did the illo on P12 became separated from the picture, and we're not sure who did it. We think it's possibly Ann Humphrey, but if we're wrong, will the proper artist please let us know and she'll get her contributor's copy.

As I type this, Valerie is at Worldcon in Chicago as a result of winning the annual fan fund - each year some active fans (in all fandoms) are nominated and voted for, and the winner gets an expenses paid trip to the con of his/her choice. This year Valerie was lucky. She left the zine all typed - except for the editorial... We hope she is enjoying herself, and I'm sure you all hope so too. The zine includes the illo by Martin Delaney that was originally meant to be in LE 50 along with an interpretation of it. The interpretation finally worked out at 20 pages, and we think is well worth waiting for. Almost by tradition picture interpretations are usually pretty short, being scenes rather than stories, and it makes a pleasant change to get a good long story instead of a 2-page scene.

Submissions of fiction, poetry and artwork are welcomed for ScoTypress zines - no death of main character, explicit sex or K/S, please - and can be sent to

Sheila Clark
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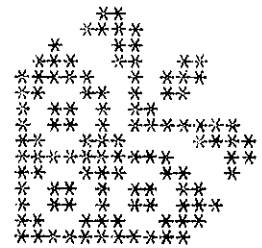
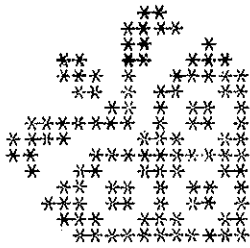
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3
SUPERMAN

by
Doreen DaFinett



Kirk was mad, and if he was brutally frank with himself, irritated too. He had invited his First Officer to accompany him to Earth on the spur of the moment, not for one minute expecting him to accept. It had been just one of those casual offers thrown out at random and not meant to be taken seriously, like asking someone to call round for a drink sometime. Neither the one offering, not the one listening, expected the offer to be taken up. Polite small-talk, his mother used to call it: 'Why, Jimmy, folk like to hear these things.' But the Vulcan had not heard about polite offers, and other such niceties; in fact he had accepted with obvious pleasure and alacrity, and now Kirk, thanks to his big mouth, was stuck with it, and had no option but to make all the necessary arrangements.

Not that the Vulcan hadn't tried. He had. In fact, everything Kirk took him to try, he excelled at, and without apparent effort, either. Football, baseball, bowling, sailing - the list was endless. And it wasn't that he was so damn good, either, that really annoyed the Human, as he readily admitted to himself; it was the ease with which Spock did what it had taken Kirk years to achieve!

In near desperation Kirk had switched to taking him to Art Galleries and Museums - not the Human's normal haunts on leave - only to discover that the Vulcan knew more about the artifacts on display than the guide himself, and Kirk had squirmed inwardly as his First Officer corrected yet again a piece of information that the guide had given them earning himself a look of murderous rage from the by now irate Welshman.

"Perhaps Sir would care to conduct the tour himself?" he'd asked with obvious acidity and sarcasm that was lost on the alien.

The dark head had shaken in negation. "Please carry on, I will merely correct your inaccuracies," he'd said blandly, and Kirk had made a dash for the nearest john to hide his red face.

Their evenings had been no less disastrous.. Kirk had taken the Vulcan to several nightclubs and dances around the town, only to find that his First Officer had become the centre of attention, and for the first time in his adult life James T. Kirk had had to take a back seat. Not that he minded that so much, he had insisted to himself; after all, most of the women here had never been off-world, and as they didn't live in one of the more cosmopolitan cities of Earth had little opportunity to meet aliens face to face - especially aliens as damned attractive as his First Officer. Kirk had no illusions about that - he's seen only too often the effect the Vulcan had on the female members of his own crew; although there, at least he comforted himself, he too had had his fair share of attention.

No, he thought again, it wasn't that he minded even that, but when the two attractive females they'd ended up with had actually started arguing quietly about who should be the Vulcan's partner for the night, and who his... and were making it perfectly plain that he was the booby-prize... that was more than his ego could stand.. To his shame he'd almost dragged the Vulcan away on some flimsy excuse, hating himself as he did so, not least because Spock had seemed completely unworried about leaving.

"Ah... did you want to stay, Spock?" he asked once they were seated in the hired aircar.

"No, Captain."

"You could have done, if you'd wanted to," he insisted.

"I am aware of that, sir. I did not wish to remain."

"Oh, okay, that's fine then." Kirk fell silent, manoeuvring the aircar with great dexterity along the busy airways out of town.

His mother's house had stood empty since her death, but Kirk still used it on leave; it was handy, and still gave him a feeling of stability, a link with the past. His lawyer arranged for the place to be repaired and decorated regularly, and had it serviced and stocked up with supplies prior to their arrival. They'd been staying there for the past three weeks.

Kirk stuck his thumb into the identity lock and the door swung open. A fire was already burning cheerfully in the hearth; the fact that it was artificial and time-regulated did nothing to detract from the general air of welcome.

Walking casually to the drinks table, Kirk poured himself a brandy, then switched on the viewer and threw himself onto a couch to watch the newscast.

"Help yourself." He pointed to the bottles and decanters.

"Thank you, not at the moment. I have had sufficient."

"Suit yourself."

The announcer droned on about the Andorian situation, a border skirmish between the Invincible and the Klingons, the latest diplomatic protest note from the Romulans about the neutral zone and its apparent violation by certain Federation merchant vessels, the trouble over the Coridan issue, and speculation over a possible Conference to be held on Babel...

Kirk switched off the viewer and refilled his glass. "I don't know why I bother to listen," he said suddenly. "Nothing but trouble everywhere in the galaxy. Makes me wonder how we don't have more wars."

"Indeed." The Vulcan stretched out his long legs in front of the welcome warmth, and studied his Captain surreptitiously. He had been only too pleased to accept this invitation to accompany the Human on leave, had been eager, in fact; but now he wondered if it had been wise. Kirk seemed not to want his company, even to resent it. Yet he had tried so hard to fit in with his friend's life-style, had made sure that he didn't let the Human down in front of his numerous friends and acquaintances. He had entered into all the activities as best he could, although to expend so much energy to achieve such a little result had seemed to his trained Vulcan mind a total and complete waste of time. And for Jim's sake he had made small-talk with the various females who somehow attached themselves each evening, although they held little or no interest for him at all. Yet still he felt he had somehow let his friend down.

He cleared his throat quietly, and glanced yet again at the mobile face a few feet away. "Perhaps it would be better if I returned to the Enterprise tomorrow," he said at last.

"Return to...? Why? Don't you like my company?" Kirk blurted out perversely.

"Of course. You know it is not that," Spock assured him at once.

"Well, if it's not my company, what the hell is it?" Kirk demanded.

"There are various tests I can carry out on the ship, and... and I do not feel I am wanted here, Captain." He had to be honest. "I am afraid I made an error in judgement. I had thought you were making a genuine offer when you asked me to accompany you; I now realise it could well have been only a... 'polite gesture', is, I believe, the phrase, and I was not meant to accept." He paused. "Please forgive my foolishness - I am still not fully au fait with the subtleties of Human behaviour."

Kirk experienced a flood of temper, more than anything with himself for

allowing the Vulcan to read him so clearly. "That's a load of crap, Spock," he said at last. "If I didn't want you here, I wouldn't have asked you to damn well come." He hesitated, then rushed on, "I'm just a bit depressed - always am when I come home to my... memories." He ran a nervous hand through his fair hair. "Now shut up about going back, okay?" He forced a smile.

The lean face still didn't look too sure, but Spock nodded slowly. "Very well. I am sorry if I was in error."

Kirk merely grunted, and they sat in comparative silence for almost an hour. Then Kirk stirred suddenly.

"How about going to Australia for a few days? There's still a lot of desert that hasn't been irrigated yet." He knew the Vulcan loved the desert regions of any planet, which reminded him of his own home, and hoped the trip might compensate for his earlier ungracious attitude.

The Vulcan softened visibly. "If you wish it, Jim. I am sure it will prove... interesting."

* * *

Two days later Kirk wasn't so sure it had been such a good idea after all. His shoes were full of sand, the pack on his back seemed heavier by the second, and the sun beat down without mercy.

"Hell, it's just like being on a damn survival course!" he muttered at last, and glared across at his companion. Yet again the Vulcan appeared unperturbed by conditions and completely at ease with the situation. Resentment rose up once more and he pushed it back ruthlessly; the Vulcan couldn't help the fact that he was desert bred - he only seemed superior...

He froze the word in his brain. 'Superior.' Yes, that was the crux of the matter, wasn't it? Spock was so damn superior! Yet it wasn't anything he did consciously or blatantly, none of Finnegan's big-headed brashness... in fact, he'd lay odds his First Officer never even gave it a thought - which in some ways made it even worse! And Kirk knew that the Vulcan would tell him he was being totally illogical if he ever mentioned it at all...

"Captain, are you having trouble with your pack? Perhaps I..."

"No, I'm not!" Kirk snapped angrily. "I'm not exactly senile yet, y'know."

"It never occurred to me that you were," the Vulcan replied stiffly.

Kirk kicked himself again. "Sorry, Spock. Jesus Christ, I seem to be doing nothing lately but aplogising to you. I guess it's just the heat - it's getting to me."

"I am sorry, too."

"Don't be. I guess it doesn't bother you, huh?" He managed to hide his sarcasm.

"The temperature on Vulcan is, of course, much higher than this," Spock admitted. "I do find it extremely pleasant here."

"Mmmmm." Kirk dared not permit himself a reply, and he dragged an arm across his sweating face, depositing sand into his already sore eyes.

"Zha!d it!" The Klingon expletive fell easily from his lips as the Vulcan lowered his pack and stepped closer to help him.

"Keep your face still, Jim - I am endeavouring to get the sand off your eyelashes."

"What a hell-hole! Why'd we come here, anyway?" Kirk demanded as long fingers cleared the last of the grittiness from his face.

"Because you wished to," Spock said gently, and Kirk laughed harshly.

"Well they say there's an idiot born every minute... I guess I'm one!"

"Do you wish to go back?"

"Yes! But I'm not going to. We've got this far, I'm not going to turn back now."

"So stubborn," Spock said softly.

"Huh? What was that?"

"I said, perhaps we should rest a while." Spock glanced up at the cloudless sky. "If we wait for the sun to pass overhead it will be easier for us to proceed."

"Okay. Sounds fine to me," Kirk conceded at once, and dropped his pack to the ground, sliding down beside it.

The Vulcan quickly undid the straps on his pack and pulled out a small atmo-synthesizer.

Kirk's eyes opened wide. "Don't tell me you've been carrying that, too!"

"I thought it might come in handy," Spock replied dismissively, and depressed the appropriate switches. A small force field sprang into being around them, and at the touch of another switch the glare of the sun diminished and a soft breeze sprang up. Kirk lay back with a loud sigh of contentment.

"Remind me to send a Stargram to the guy who invented this gadget when we get back aboard," he instructed with feeling.

"It was, I believe, a scientist called Xadimah who lived on..." Spock began automatically, and seeing Kirk's wide grin allowed an eyebrow to rise in reply, then fell silent.

"Spock."

"Yes, sir?"

"Thanks." Seeing the look of enquiry on the lean face, Kirk continued, "For pandering to my Human weaknesses."

"Thanks are unnecessary," Spock said at once. "It was, after all, only logical that we should be as comfortable as possible."

"We?" Kirk asked softly.

But the Vulcan refused to be baited.

* * *

Ayers Rock was spectacular in the setting sun, and they were assured it would be even better in the first light of dawn. The small township of Alice Springs, which was not far away, had not grown much bigger over the passing years, except that several large hotels now dominated the skyline, and a small spaceport was available for tourists from other planets.

Kirk was only too pleased to avail himself of the facilities of one of the hotels, and smiled contentedly as he lowered himself into the round 'swirl' pool beside his First Officer. The Vulcan had at first declined the offer to join him, but finding that even the showers here were water only, had finally capitulated and given in once more to the Human's persuasive charm.

"This is great, isn't it?" Kirk enthused yet again.

"It is... stimulating, yes," the Vulcan agreed after due consideration, "but I cannot see why they do not have sonics here, considering that water must be at a premium, and..."

"Don't worry about it, Mr. Spock," Kirk teased. "I'm sure the Aussies would give you a perfectly logical explanation."

"Indeed," the Vulcan agreed, "and that, I should like to hear."

He dodged the sponge that was thrown at him, then picking it up himself threw it back with deadly accuracy, hitting the Human squarely in the middle of his face. The wrestling match that threatened to erupt was interrupted by the timely arrival of the tray of drinks Kirk had ordered earlier...

* * *

The next morning Kirk groaned loudly as Spock woke him well before dawn to enable them to be down at the Rock by aircar before sunrise; but the Human had to admit it was well worth the effort. Afterwards Spock had been fascinated by the Rock paintings of the early Aborigines, as Kirk had known he would be, and they had both enjoyed the comparatively easy climb to the summit.

Several hours later found them well on their way, once more heading out across the Simpson Desert. Kirk had his communicator handy, because this leave had only come about owing to the Coridon crisis. The Federation was trying to arrange a meeting of all interested parties on Babel, as the newscast had said, and the Enterprise was on stand-by to ferry the Ambassadors and diplomats should the need arise. They were both aware that they could be recalled at any time, but as the Vulcan was now so obviously enjoying himself, and as Kirk knew he had been a heel for the first part of their leave with his needless and senseless jealousy - and there was really no other word he could honestly use - he only hoped they wouldn't be recalled too soon.

Spock saw that the Human was now obviously in a far better frame of mind, and he allowed Kirk to set the pace, adhering to it strictly himself, though both men were aware that the Vulcan could have gone much faster. They chatted amiably and rested often, Kirk usually taking a sip of water, the Vulcan taking none.

During one such stop, Kirk walked off to find a suitable place to relieve himself. Not that he was shy - being on numerous landing parties where the criteria was 'stay in view of everyone at all times' didn't allow for any false modesty - but he knew that both he and the Vulcan valued their privacy, and whenever possible and circumstances allowed, they acted accordingly.

Finding a suitable sand dune he duly completed his task, straightened his tunic, and glanced up the side of the dune, deciding almost at once to climb to the top. Not that he expected to see anything but more sand, but plain curiosity wasn't limited only to his First Officer.

The climb to the top took only a couple of minutes, but unfortunately the trip down was not quite so uneventful as his ankle turned over on a patch of soft sand and he somersaulted from top to bottom, landing in a winded, ungainly heap at the base. He giggled helplessly at his undignified descent as soon as he had regained his breath and realised he was unhurt, and went into even more gales of laughter as he imagined the Vulcan in a similar fall.

"Are you all right, sir?" The lean figure of his imagination suddenly appeared in front of him, and still chuckling, he scrambled to his feet.

"Yes, sure. I..."

"Jim! Do not move!" The order was too late, and Kirk felt the fangs bite deep into his leg through the tough material of his trousers. He kicked out instinctively and threw himself to one side as the Vulcan sprang to help him, but his attacker slid away to disappear once more among the sand and rocks.

Kirk's hands scrabbled to roll up his trouser leg, but firm hands pushed his own away, and without any apparent effort the material was ripped apart to display the dual marks left by the snake.

Kirk drew out his knife. "Cut it," he said briefly.

"No." The dark head shook decisively. "You would be more likely to die from blood poisoning than the actual bite," he replied, then stooped to place his lips to the now angry wound and sucked firmly, spitting the moisture

obtained onto the hot sand.

"I will go and fetch the medical kit - I left it behind over there. Do not move Jim; you will only cause the poison to move into your system more quickly."

Kirk nodded, and watched as the familiar shape disappeared round the sand dune to reappear shortly carrying both their packs.

"Did you recognise the type of snake?" he asked at last.

"No," Kirk admitted at once. "I'm not all that well up on Australian reptiles."

"Unfortunately," said Spock wryly, "neither am I."

The Human's eyes opened in surprise at the admission as the Vulcan went on, "Perhaps you would give me the communicator. We had better transfer back at once, as we are uncertain of what type of snake it was, and I do not know which serum to give you, or even if I have the correct one here. A mistake would be dangerous."

"Yeah, okay." Kirk reached to his belt at the rear, and stopped. "Oh, hell!"

The dark eyes looked at him.

"The damn thing's gone. When I slid down the dune, it must have come off."

"Why did you slide down?" the Vulcan asked suddenly.

"Why? 'Cause I got to the top, and on the way down I fell," he admitted.

"I see." The tone was cold.

Oh, Jesus! Kirk thought, now he's mad at me! He shot a quick glance at the expressionless face. "I've... er... bitched it up a bit, haven't I?" he said at last.

"Yes." The reply was totally uncompromising as Spock set up the atmosphere synthesizer again.

"Well, there's no need to be so damn smug about it!" Kirk snapped. "It was pure bad luck."

"Really?" The Vulcan fastened a tourniquet around Kirk's leg as he spoke.

"Yes, really!" Kirk clenched his fists angrily, more at his own stupidity in losing their one communicator than at the Vulcan's tone and manner. "Where're you going?" he asked as Spock began to walk away.

The lean figure turned in obvious surprise. "I am going to look for the communicator," he said quietly. "Where did you think I was going?"

Kirk felt himself blush with embarrassment at the rebuke, and lay back, shaking his head. "I'm sorry," he said softly, knowing the Vulcan was aware of what he had meant.

The dark eyes studied him again, then Spock murmured, "Remember to relieve the pressure on the tourniquet," before he turned to his self-appointed task.

An hour dragged by. Spock was now out of sight, and Kirk managed to reach the water bottle without too much effort. He took a quick mouthful, wondering how long before the poison would begin to affect him. He knew there were many different types of snake in Australia, and off-hand, he could think of none that weren't extremely poisonous!

Goddammit, it would have to be me, too, he thought. This sort of thing just didn't seem to happen to the Vulcan. Smartass! He knew he was being unfair, but what the hell! He couldn't hear him... Mr. Perfect, never making a single Human mistake; succeeding at everything he attempted. Why, even the first time he'd taken him bowling he'd got strike after strike... and then

spouting all that crap about height, weight of the ball, distance from the pins... He eased his cramped muscles. Dammit, now he wanted to relieve himself again! He shouldn't have had that water. Carefully, he began to sit up.

"What do you think you are doing?" the familiar voice demanded.

Kirk twisted his head and glared up at the tall figure. "I've got to take a leak," he said firmly, "and I'm not going to lie here and do it under me, either. I'm not in my second childhood yet, y'know."

"It is unwise to move," the Vulcan stated.

"Yeah, I know," Kirk rolled to his feet and stood tottering. He suddenly felt very weak. Strong arms encircled his waist to support him.

"Come, then. Over there will suffice."

As the Vulcan settled him once more a wave of nausea wracked his body, and he felt the pressure of the tourniquet being eased once more.

Later he fell into a light doze, and it was early evening when he next awoke. He glanced around for the Vulcan at once, and was surprised to see him scrabbling around almost desperately in the soft sand; but he was even more surprised to hear the Vulcan's muttered oaths and curses. He had never heard his First Officer swear before!

Then suddenly it dawned on his now-befuddled mind that that was Spock, his correct, unflappable, impeccable First Officer, who was slowly going to pieces before his eyes... because of him! Spock was worried about him! The hazel eyes felt strangely moist, and he blinked furiously as the Vulcan turned as if realising he was being observed. He came over quickly, eased the tourniquet again, and moistened his dry lips with the water.

"How do you feel, Jim?"

Kirk attempted a smile of reassurance, and failed miserably. "Not bad, considering."

"You are a bad liar, James Kirk."

The Human nodded. "Yeah, you could be right, at that... No luck?"

"No." The Vulcan sat down on his haunches, and Kirk saw the defeat evident on the normally impassive face.

"Spock." He touched the gaunt cheek gently, feeling greatly daring. "Thanks... You've done all you can." He paused, and then went on, "I know you don't like to be beaten, but fate beats us all, sooner or later."

"Fate?" An elegant eyebrow slid upwards.

Kirk nodded gently. "I mean you're good, damn good, at everything you do - you know that." He smiled ruefully. "These last few weeks you've made me feel like a wet-nosed beginner... every time I showed you something, you ended up better than me."

"I am sorry."

"There's no need to be," Kirk said swiftly. "I just wish I was that good, but it can be a little shattering to a poor Human's ego having 'Superman' as a friend." He grinned weakly. "Takes a little getting used to."

The Vulcan remained silent, not really knowing what to say.

"It's funny, I've become used to you dragging my ass out of trouble time after time, and just because you beat me in a few unimportant sports, I resent it." He shook his head at his own stupidity.

"You cannot help your nature," the Vulcan said at last.

"Because I'm Human?" Kirk asked.

"Yes."

"Maybe you're right - we're an arrogant bunch of bastards, that's for sure. Mind you, I've always wanted to be King of the Castle, at school, college, the Academy. Never second best, Spock, always top. Guess that's why I had to make it to Captain."

"And you succeeded," the deep voice murmured.

"Yeah, that's right, too. I succeeded. And how many potential friends did I crush on the way up? Even now I've made it, top of the heap, I still have to prove my damn superiority... Even with you, Spock. Even with you..." He rested his head on the muscular arm and then squeezed the Vulcan's hand gently. "This is our first shore leave together, and I haven't made it much of a success, have I?"

"I have not been totally disappointed," the Vulcan replied quickly. "No-one has ever wanted to spend time in my company before."

"Christ, but you make me feel ten kinds of a heel!"

"Such was not my intention, Captain. Perhaps I tried a little too hard to please you. I thought if I did not succeed in all the sports we played I would let you down." The dark eyes fell. "I did not wish to do that."

Kirk shook his head, wondering if he would ever now have the opportunity really to get to know this alien.

"Do you think they'll miss us?" he asked after a while.

"Not soon enough," Spock conceded; he could not lie. "It was known by the authorities that we carried a communicator; it will be some time before they begin to search."

"Yeah, that's what I figured," Kirk said softly. "And you'll be back by then, anyway."

"Back?"

"Spock, don't let's kid ourselves. We both know we can't keep this poison at bay much longer. Okay, I'm not moving, and the tourniquet has kept it from spreading too fast, but it will, sooner or later, you know that - and when it does, you're to leave me here and go back."

"But..."

"No 'buts', Mr. Spock - there's no point in carrying a dead man with you. Bury me here. I've no family to speak of now; there's only Peter since Sam died, and I'd be as happy here as on some Godforsaken unnamed planet."

The Vulcan moved to support his back as he sat up. Hazel eyes searched his face.

"Promise?"

The pressure on his arm increased by way of reply, and he settled back. "Thanks." He turned his eyes upwards. "Just take a look at all those stars. Makes you feel you can touch them, doesn't it?"

The Vulcan opened his mouth to refute the statement, and changing his mind, shut it again. They sat in quiet peace for several hours, neither man sleeping, and in the quiet hour before dawn Kirk stared in amazement as the familiar sparkles of the transporter began to form into two figures a few yards in front of them.

It was Sulu and McCoy. The doctor moved forward as soon as he could.

"Jim, what...?"

"Please, Doctor," the Vulcan interrupted, "the Captain has been bitten by a poisonous snake. We have been unable to reach you..."

McCoy moved forward again, and stopped, tutting angrily as Spock deactivated the forcefield. "When did it happen?" He fell to his knees, his medikit open.

The Vulcan gave a concise report.

"That accounts for it," Sulu said suddenly.

"Accounts for what, Lieutenant?" Spock asked.

"We got our orders late yesterday, sir. We've to pick up all the various delegates and transport them to Babel, just as the Captain expected. Anyway, we recalled all personnel on leave, but we could get no reply from you and the Captain. Then Lt. Uhura found we were getting a signal of sorts - it was blurred, and we couldn't get it any clearer."

The Vulcan nodded slowly. "The Captain's communicator was dropped. It must have fallen face-up in the sand with the grid open."

"Yes," the young Oriental nodded vigorously, "I guess it was that; that would do it. Anyway, we decided to beam down to see what had happened; Dr. McCoy insisted on coming in case you'd been hurt."

"Most fortuitous," Spock replied as the doctor finished his ministrations and rose to his feet again.

"Mr. Sulu, you'd better get us back up straight away, and have a medical team standing by just in case."

The Helmsman nodded and complied at once.

* * *

It was several hours later that the Vulcan arrived in Sickbay to find his Captain sitting up looking none the worse for wear. Seeing his First Officer hesitating at the door, Kirk smiled a welcome and waved him in.

Spock went straight into a report of ship's business, announcing that they were under way having left orbit an hour previously. As he finished it was obvious that he wished to say something more.

"Yes, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked at last.

"I was wondering, Captain... When next we visit Vulcan, would you do me the honour of allowing me to show you my home planet?"

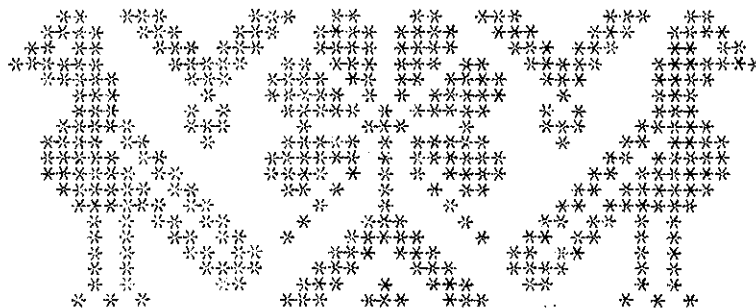
Kirk smiled with genuine relief. He had wondered if the Vulcan would wish to continue their embryo friendship after their dismal start on Earth.

"I'd be honoured, Mr. Spock."

The Vulcan nodded, then said a trifle sheepishly, "Amongst other full Vulcan, sir... I would not be a Superman."

Kirk laughed softly. "Not correct, Mr. Spock!" And he winked. "To me you'll be a Superman wherever we happen to be!" he said teasingly, watching his friend's reaction.

As the Vulcan hurriedly made his escape, Kirk could have sworn his ears had turned a bright shade of green.



THE JOURNEY HOME
by
Vicki Richards



The long-range shuttle travelling back to Vulcan seemed illogically to be taking far more time than it ought. Sarek stared thoughtfully out of his cabin viewing port. Sitting on the bed, Amanda watched him; she had known it would be worthless insisting that he obey the orders of Dr. McCoy and rest, so she had remained silent on that point. He had, after all, spent some of the time since they had left the Enterprise resting, if he had not followed all of the doctor's orders; for a great deal of the time he had been silent and more thoughtful than usual. Amanda had had no need to ask what he was thinking about.

Sarek was aware that she was watching him, and was also aware that she knew what he was thinking about. He expected that, and could even admit privately that he had come to rely on her ability, strange in a non-telepath, to know his thoughts. Over the years he

had discovered that there was far more to Humans than even the wisest Vulcans generally believed. Yet until the events of the past few days he had been unwilling to admit it, even to himself.

He was troubled, and it was a sensation he did not care for. On the rare occasions in his life when he had experienced it before, he had firmly eliminated it from his consciousness. He was a Vulcan, and always made the correct logical decision, and therefore could not be wrong.

But now he knew, knew without any doubt, that he had been wrong; or at the very least had been guilty of a grave error of judgement. An error that had kept him and his son apart for so many years. And he knew that those years had been even longer for Amanda.

Amanda watched as he stood silently, and smiled. The years had indeed been long, but they were over now; her son and her husband were friends again, and she could be happy. But it had almost taken the lives of both of them to achieve it.

She remembered those days on the Enterprise, only just past but already committing themselves to her mind as a memory. A memory she would never forget. Neither would she forget the people she had met, the people who seemed to hold her son in such esteem, both as a Commander and as a friend.

When Spock and Sarek had been in such danger, she had seen the concern written on the faces of the Doctor and of James Kirk. The knowledge then that Spock's Captain and friend was as concerned as she had helped her. She was glad that he had found such friends, her son who had spent so much of his life alone.

Sarek, too, had seen the friendship that existed between the three, and deep within some corner of himself he was glad. At times during Spock's childhood he had wondered whether his half-Human son would ever find a place where he could truly be at peace. Of course, he had told himself and Spock that Vulcan discipline and training was the answer; and it had been, in part. Spock was greatly respected by all scientists, and especially by Vulcans, even if the course he had chosen for himself was not the one Sarek would have chosen for him.

Now, having been to the Enterprise, and having seen what kind of a person his son had become, Sarek had no choice but to acknowledge that the Vulcan Science Academy might not, after all, have been the right place for Spock.

And Spock had known. He, Sarek, had been wrong. He looked out at the constellations and knew that he, a full-blooded Vulcan, was capable of feeling pain. Sorrow, that he had hurt his son.

"Come and rest, my husband," said Amanda gently from behind him. "Worrying will do no good, and there is nothing to worry about now."

Sarek turned and regarded her with mild surprise. He had not heard her cross the cabin floor, so immersed had he been in his thoughts. He did not even bother to deny that he had been worrying, unVulcan as such an activity might be.

"Very well," he replied quietly, and sat in a chair, steeping his fingers in the same way his son did when considering something.

"Amanda." Sarek spoke suddenly, regarding her intently. Only rarely did he ask her advice. "Do you think, when we have returned to Vulcan, that Spock will come and visit us more frequently than he has done in the past?"

Amanda smiled, glad he had asked the question. "I am sure that he will. I told you - there is nothing to worry about now. Everything will be all right."

He nodded, accepting her Human judgement, and made another decision. "When we arrive home, I shall go and see T'Pol. I shall tell her of the happenings of the last few days, and that we were wrong to try and force Spock to join the Science Academy against his will. Spock belongs where he is. T'Pol will also come to realise this."

"I am glad, Sarek; I am glad." Now it was Amanda's turn to cross to the window and stare out at the stars, so she could hide the tears which threatened to run down her cheeks. It was more than she had hoped for. Now truly she could be happy on Vulcan, now that she knew her son had finally found a home and friends, now that Sarek had finally accepted Spock for what he was, a man worth respecting on any planet.

"Amanda," said Sarek softly from his chair, making her turn round, "I am glad, too."

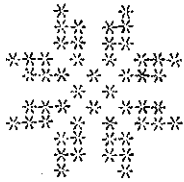
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BE THERE

Lorraine Goodison

Do not signal,
I may not see you.
Do not whisper,
I may not hear.
Do not speak,
for words confuse me.
Simply be there,
in silence,
my friend.

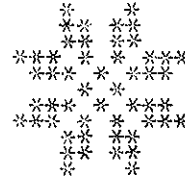




SNOW LEAVE

by

Linda Watt



Kirk stood looking down at the white heap lying at his feet and regretted - not for the first time - that he had persuaded his once-immaculate, dignified and logical First Officer into joining him on this shore leave.

It had all started five days ago when the Enterprise had gone into orbit round the planet Omnadawn, after two months out in space. Not a very long period to go without R & R, but in that short time there had been an encounter with the Klingons, and then the Enterprise had been hit by meteorites which under normal circumstances would have been a rough ride, but due to temporary repairs had proved disastrous. This had left the Enterprise partially disabled and only able to limp to the nearest Starbase at Warp One. When Kirk thought about all the problems that had arisen and been solved in order to survive he shuddered, but fortunately there had been no fatalities and few injuries, mostly bruises from being flung around; which was one thing he was thankful for. With the hard work of his crew, who appeared always to be on duty whenever he went on a surprise inspection/morale-boosting tour, the Enterprise finally docked for a complete overhaul. Everyone badly needed to get away from it all, to relax and renew their energies for the next, more than likely difficult, assignment Starfleet would throw at them. A small smile came to Kirk's face at the prospect of how nice the boring job of star mapping could appear to the Enterprise crew at this very moment.

Once in orbit the Starbase staff put their own skeleton crew on board, as no-one was fit to stay on duty for any length of time. The Base Commander, Commodore Venkitar, was slightly worried when he heard that the Enterprise was due to arrive at his base - they had something of a reputation for 'lively and inventive' shore leaves. However, after seeing the state the Enterprise was in he felt he couldn't blame them, but secretly hoped that the crew might be a bit too exhausted, and would therefore spend a quiet time ashore. To help sort out R & R matters he assigned two of his Admin, staff to liaise with the crew in arranging their plans.

Kirk had been sitting in his cabin deciding what sort of leave he would really enjoy. His first choice would be to go to some lonely beach to soak up the sun, with only his two close friends for company, and to forget the Enterprise for a week. Unfortunately, unknown to him, his 'friends' had other plans. It wasn't until they were all together discussing this with Lt. Kyson that it finally came to light.

"Eh, Jim, I'm afraid I can't go," said McCoy, somewhat timidly. He knew how much Kirk had been relying on his and Spock's company for this break. "I received a message from the Base Hospital asking if I could drop by for a couple of days to see someone."

Kirk glanced curiously from McCoy to Spock, then back to McCoy. He saw a similar expression in Spock's eyes, even if his raised eyebrows had not given him away. Both were wondering who would be calling the doctor when everyone on the Base knew that they were all relieved of duty.

"Bones, you know you need rest as much as the rest of us. More, in fact, since you kept all of us on our feet through this crisis."

"What makes you think this is work, Jim? I do have a few friends in the medical profession who do contact me for a social chat as well as for professional reasons," countered McCoy.

"Oh. I didn't know anyone would want to contact an old country doctor for a social chat," replied Kirk, trying hard not to burst out laughing at McCoy's hurt expression at the description of him being 'old'.

"Before you make any more insulting remarks, Jim Kirk, I will make it

quite clear to you; this is an old friend I went through Med School with - in fact, at one stage we even considered getting married. I haven't seen her for years, not since before her husband died, and we have a lot of catching up to do. So if you three gentlemen don't mind, I'm going to get ready to beam down."

Kirk's next disappointment came when Lt. Kyson advised, "Commander, I had some difficulty getting a place for you on that course you requested, but I finally managed to get a cancellation. The course starts tomorrow at 0900 hours."

"What! Spock, you need rest as well as the rest of us, not going off on some stupid course you possibly know more about than the instructor."

However, the expression Kirk read on Spock's face told him he was adamant about going on this course.

In a fit of anger, which had been slowly rising, Kirk turned to Lt. Kyson and said, "Find me some place that is the exact opposite to a sun-soaked beach, anything I can do on my own, considering my company is not wanted on this leave."

"Sir?" queried the bemused Liaison Officer.

"I said... Oh, never mind. Find me some... some... ski resort. I've heard the Bienhauf Mountains have some excellent ski areas, similar to Earth's Alps and Dolomite ranges. It's been years since I did any skiing."

* * *

Later that night there was a buzz on Kirk's cabin door.

"Come."

There in the doorway stood McCoy, a little nervous about what he was going to do. He had heard what had happened just after he left, and felt a bit guilty about Kirk being left to go on leave on his own.

"Jim, can I see you for a moment? I'm a bit worried about Spock."

"Sure, Bones," said Kirk, fighting hard to keep the worry out of his voice at McCoy's words. "What's bothering you about him?"

"It's just that Spock's been working too hard recently. I know his usual argument, 'Vulcans can go longer than us Humans,' but there is a stage where they reach a point of collapse like us, and I think Spock's nearing that point. He has to get away from work, even this course he plans to go on, and unwind. And before you start arguing that his meditation is the Vulcan form of rest - I know, but he still needs a complete change. Don't ask me why I feel he needs a change, I just know - call it instinct if you want. Jim, please try and persuade him to go with you. He's pushing himself too hard."

Before Kirk had a chance to discuss this McCoy quickly added, "I had better go if I don't want to keep my lady friend waiting for me at the Base Transporter," and hastily departed Kirk's quarters.

Little did Kirk know he did not go directly to the Transporter Room; instead he had another quick mission to perform before he made his retreat.

He found Spock on the Observation Deck where he knew the Vulcan often went if he was too keyed up to meditate; gazing out at the stars seemed to have a calming influence on his mind that he sometimes could not get from the many mental disciplines he practised. McCoy always felt he was intruding, even if Spock had welcomed him in the past, but he knew he had to say something, and quickly, before he lost the courage to continue with his little ploy.

"Spock, I need to speak to you about Jim," he said, with just enough worry in his voice to attract Spock's attention.

Spock turned to face McCoy; although his face was its usual expressionless

self something in his eyes told McCoy he had said the right thing to get Spock worried.

"Spock, let's sit down. This is difficult enough to say without having to stand while we talk." At which point he promptly sat on the nearest chair, making Spock sit down out of courtesy.

"Spock, I'm worried about Jim. These past two months, since that run-in with the Klingons, he's been under a tremendous strain, and the last thing he needs now is to go off somewhere on his own. I know what you're going to say, that you would be of little help in getting Jim to relax, and that I am the natural one to help. I know for a fact that Jim enjoys your company, and will relax more easily if he knows you are there in support."

Before Spock had a chance to say anything McCoy's communicator buzzed. Uhura announced that it was time for him to beam down to the Base unless he wanted to miss his turn. Silently he thanked Uhura for her timely, pre-arranged signal, and made a mental note to buy her something exotic for all her help and silence in this little deception.

* * *

Kirk was lying on his bed trying to think of a way to approach Spock to persuade him to come with him, and also how to tell Lt. Kyson that he now wanted the sunsoaked sandy beach holiday after all. He had not been there long when his buzzer went.

"Come," he called, a bit annoyed at having his thoughts interrupted.

Much to Kirk's surprise his 'problem' was standing there in his doorway, but he was a little discouraged as he still did not know how to approach the subject logically.

"Captain, may I see you for a moment? It should not take long. However, if you are resting I can come back."

"It's all right, Spock, I wasn't resting, just lying here thinking. What can I do for you?"

"It is about your trip to Vinotro. I feel it is unwise for you to go into the mountains on your own. I therefore ask permission to accompany you."

Kirk could hardly believe his ears. It seemed that his problem had been solved. However, his anger was still with him at the way he had been hurt earlier.

"Spock, for one thing, I am not going into the mountains on my own, I am going to a ski resort where there will be lots of people, and I hardly think I am likely to get lost even if I am on my own there," he answered forcefully.

As he started to continue he could see that he had hurt Spock by his answer, and decided to try and clear the whole thing up quickly before the misinterpretation got out of hand.

"I'm sorry, Spock. I would welcome your company, it's just that I don't think Vinotro is suitable. Let me get in touch with Lt. Kyson and change the arrangements."

"Captain... Jim... can we go to Vinotro? I have read much about Terran sports, and have often wanted to try them, but have not had much opportunity to do so."

"Okay, Spock, but only on the condition that you wrap up warmly. I don't want McCoy bearing down on me if you come back in a worse condition than when you left," he mused.

"Very well, Jim."

"Good, now that's settled let's get some rest. I want to leave early tomorrow morning and I plan to have a busy leave, so we'll need as much sleep

as possible. Goodnight, Spock."

"Goodnight, Jim," said Spock as he left to make his way back to his own quarters, breathing a silent sigh of relief at having successfully persuaded Kirk to let him go along.

* * *

Kirk was extremely jubilant at the thought of being away from the Enterprise for a whole week, away from all the problems and worries of command, and having the company of at least one of his friends. This leave promised to be fun.

The resort was small, and built in a traditional Alpine style, away from the commercialised centres, and high enough to have plenty of snow (in fact, this was one of the resort's better years for the amount of snow that had fallen), and quiet enough to completely get away from it all. Lt. Kyson had assured Kirk that this area was well-known for its good weather at this time of year, and it was proving to be true, with cloudless blue skies which made Kirk feel a little homesick.

It had been a long while since Kirk had last skied, but he was sure that all those long winter school holidays, spent at his aunt's winter home at Lake Tho, helping in the nearby ski patrol and occasionally in the ski school when the instructors were busy, would pay off now when he could teach his friend to ski. However, one thing did worry Kirk, and that was how to keep the Vulcan warm when most beginners spent most of their time on the ground.

"It should be fun seeing him falling all over the place," thought Kirk, "though probably with his sense of balance he won't."

The first problems to bring Kirk to change his mind came before they had even left the hotel. It started when Kirk, on McCoy's orders, insisted that Spock wear so much clothing he could hardly move.

"Jim, I know Dr. McCoy was concerned that I keep warm, but I do not think it necessary to wear two heavy sweaters on top of my thermal clothing along with the two ski suits you insist I wear. Please let me dress so that I will be comfortable - after all, if necessary I can always come back to the hotel to put on some more clothes."

So, settling for one ski suit and one sweater, they set off to hire their equipment.

At the ski shop the young assistant seemed to be all fingers and thumbs when it came to fitting out Spock - after all, it is not every day one sees a Vulcan at a cold temperature holiday resort. Even with the help of the latest computer processed ski boots, Spock still had trouble getting a pair of boots to fit comfortably. Much to his embarrassment, Kirk burst out laughing at his first attempts to walk in the stiff, high-backed boots; he had often heard people refer to Spock's movements as 'cat-like' - if they could only see him now, when his movements closely resembled the monster in that classic Frankenstein video he had watched recently!

"Spock, forget about putting your foot down normally; use a rocking movement and you'll manage better," Kirk commented to put Spock out of his misery. "That's better. Now, let's get going, I'm dying to start skiing again."

Fortunately the hotel and hire shop were near the bottom of the slopes and they did not have far to walk; even so, Spock did nearly take Kirk's head off when he turned quickly to see something and swung the skis on his shoulder round in Kirk's direction. On the way to the slopes Kirk once again began to talk about his days in the ski patrol - much to Spock's annoyance, as he had heard the story four times so far that day.

It had been agreed that Kirk would teach Spock himself instead of having separate instructors, Kirk's argument being that it was more fun teaching

someone to ski than skiing on one's own.

There was no trouble teaching the basics of putting the skis on, walking and turning, simply because this was done on a flat piece of ground. The problems started when it came to walking uphill. Even after being told to put the ski across the hill and edge the ski by pushing his knees into the hill, every so often Spock either did not edge hard enough, or the angle of the hill changed slightly; but inevitably Spock went out of control and careered into Kirk, knocking him off his feet most times so that they landed on the ground in a tangle of arms and legs.

After a few attempts Spock began to get used to this. One thing he had no difficulty learning was how to get up correctly, as Kirk demonstrated this while he was getting up after their collisions. The next stage was to teach Spock how to traverse across the slope. This was no problem as he seemed to have a habit of doing this unintentionally, and occasionally aimed for Kirk. By now Kirk was beginning to be able to get out of his way quickly enough, although on one or two occasions he was distracted by some attractive female and got caught off guard.

Once the very basic movements had been mastered Kirk decided to call a break and they headed towards a nearby cafe, much to Spock's relief, although he would not admit - even to himself - that he was tired. He had not realised that skiing was a lot harder than it had looked in those tapes he had been studying - they made it appear so simple. Kirk was not slow in admitting that he was tired and needed a break; he also said he was hungry after all that hard work, and it was past lunch time anyway.

Over lunch Spock commented that he would like to visit a museum in a nearby town rather than go skiing that afternoon; apparently it had some interesting pieces of pre-ice age history that he would like to study. What he did not tell Kirk was that he wanted Jim to have a good time as well, and he felt he was holding Kirk back from tackling some of the runs he himself was unable to tackle at this stage. Kirk was reluctant to let Spock go on his own, but it did not take too much persuasion on Spock's part to make him change his mind. This agreed, they each went their separate ways, with an understanding that they would meet back at the hotel that evening for dinner.

* * *

The next day turned out to be as nice as the first - blue skies and sunshine. Today Kirk decided to try and show Spock how to do snowplough turns, and if was able to master these, take him up one of the chairlifts to a very gentle slope he had found the day before.

"What I want you to do is plant your poles downhill, the same as you do for turning round, but stop halfway; then put your skis out into a wide V-shape with the toes almost together. Now bend your knees until the edges dig into the snow so you don't move, and once you feel secure, take the poles out," said Kirk as he slowly demonstrated a snowplough.

"Now, once you get into that position, stand up, flatten off the skis which will cause them to run downhill, or down the fall-line, as we say in the trade," commented Kirk as he slowly started to move, "and when you want to stop sink down until the edges bite into the snow again."

"That's right," he commented as Spock got into the correct position. Unfortunately as his skis faced downhill he did not push the heels out quickly enough, and he ended up skiing straight downhill out of control.

"Too bad!" yelled Kirk, trying not to laugh. "You almost had it. Come up and try again."

Next time Spock got a bit further, but he did not edge the skis enough and started careering downhill again, only to trip over one of his poles and end up in a heap. It took a couple of attempts before he mastered the technique of how

much pressure had to be applied to the skis to get the edges in, and from then on he had no trouble. In fact, now that he had mastered this he quickly managed turning from a 'fall-line' position.

After a couple of disastrous attempts he managed eventually to turn from a traverse position. To help him get the hang of turning where he had to turn rather than where he wanted to turn, Kirk planted his poles quite far apart and told Spock to turn round them. Turning round the first pole was easy, but when it came to linking the second turn it did not quite work out, and he ended up on the ground because he stepped one ski over the other. The next attempt was slightly better; however, when the skis were facing straight downhill he went out of control and started skiing straight towards Kirk again. Fortunately this time Kirk managed to get out of the way in time - but his skis did not. When Spock's skis hit Kirk's he lost his balance again and landed on the ground. Spock had another attempt at this manoeuvre, and this time did manage to get round both poles, although it was still not very stylish.

Kirk abandoned his hope that he would be able to take Spock up the chairlift that morning as, like nearly all beginners, Spock was able to turn in one direction without any problems, but could not turn in the other. So, until lunchtime, the rest of the morning was spent on getting Spock to turn to his weakest side, with the occasional accident when he skied through one of the poles instead of round it.

Again at lunch Spock said he had planned to spend the afternoon at the museum to continue his study. Kirk tried hard to persuade him to come back out skiing, though not telling him what he had planned, but Spock was adamant. Kirk felt a bit disappointed, but once he had done his first run, a long, fairly easy 5 km run, he got over this.

* * *

The next day was again sunny, and if anything even warmer. This time Kirk was determined that Spock would spend the whole day skiing - he could continue his study once he got back to the Enterprise. Their leave was going by so quickly, and he had not even managed to get Spock up to the top of the mountain as yet.

Much to Spock's surprise, Kirk headed straight for the chairlift. "Come on, Spock, you can manage the run at the top, and if you don't feel that you can manage the run down to the bottom, you can always get the chairlift back down again. I planned to take you up here yesterday, but you would go off to that stupid museum."

"Jim, it is not a stupid museum. Although it is small, it has a number of unique pieces that are mentioned in various books about this planet, and are well worth the time spent visiting," said Spock, in a ploy to distract Kirk from taking him up on the chairlift.

"Come on, stop talking, and get on that chair," replied Kirk, seeing right through Spock's little plan and determined he would get him up to the gentle run if it killed him; mind you, after some of Spock's recent stopping techniques it probably would!

It was a very impressive view, which Spock reluctantly acknowledged. He was more concerned, though, about how he would get back down if Kirk insisted that they ski back to the hotel today.

Kirk spotted his concern and added, "Don't worry, I don't expect you to ski that today - maybe tomorrow," he teased.

The ramp at the top almost caused trouble for Spock as he came off it a bit unsteadily, but due to some foresight Kirk had managed to get off a lot quicker, and was well out of his way. Somehow Spock actually managed to stay on his feet, much to Kirk's surprise, as this was one of the difficulties he had neglected to tell Spock about - another would be the next method of getting uphill, the poma tow. It was not too long, but it did go at quite a speed, and

gave a slight jerk as one moved off.

As they waited in the small queue that had built up due to everyone arriving on the slopes at the same time, Kirk explained.

"All you have to do is get your skis round to face uphill - don't worry, the board at the back will stop them running backwards - then put your feet slightly apart and place the bar between your legs. After that just relax and let it pull you uphill, but don't sit down on the bar or you'll fall."

While they moved forward Spock kept an eye on how it was done - it didn't look too difficult. What he did not realise was that Kirk was worried in case this put Spock off, and was keeping his fingers crossed that he would manage it - perhaps on his third or fourth attempt.

Much to their surprise Spock managed it first time. However, Kirk was so concerned about how Spock might manage, he was not watching what he was doing himself, and ended up falling off the tow!

The rest of the morning was taken up with revision lessons. With the wide open space the higher slopes provided it was easier for Spock to do the things he had been taught on previous days, and he was even able to progress to slightly more advanced techniques. Somehow Spock seemed to be over his awkwardness, and managed these new techniques without any trouble at all, so Kirk decided it was time to start working on Spock's style - but that could wait until after lunch.

Kirk had got wise to Spock's method of letting him get away to do some serious skiing by visiting the museum in the afternoon. To try to discourage him today he decided to go to the Mountain Top Restaurant - it would not be so easy to escape from there, as one had to ski back to the chairlift. The tow up was a double bar, and caused one or two hair-raising moments as Kirk either had to steer Spock's skis in the right direction as he went over some outcrops of rock which had become exposed because of a recent storm, or hold him on as they went over some bumps.

What Kirk did not realise was that today Spock had enjoyed himself so much he planned to stay up on the mountain, staying on the nursery slopes while Kirk could go off and ski some of the more difficult runs. Over lunch they discussed what they planned to do, and afterwards Kirk helped Spock down his first easy run back to the nursery slopes before heading for the advanced runs himself.

Just before the chairlift closed for the night Kirk met up again with Spock, and to his surprise Spock wanted to try to ski back to the hotel, which they then did. It was not all that good an attempt, with Spock often losing control of his skis and heading straight downhill, stopping his unscheduled slide by falling over. By the time they got back to the hotel Kirk was a nervous wreck worrying that Spock would end up with a broken leg, or more likely a broken neck, but Spock was thoroughly enjoying himself - though his Vulcan upbringing would not permit him to show it.

* * *

The rest of the week was spent with Kirk giving Spock lessons during the morning, a stop together for lunch at the Mountain Top Restaurant, and then skiing on separate runs in the afternoon. Little did Kirk realise that in the afternoons Spock would tackle a couple of runs on his own, ones that Kirk had forbidden him to attempt in the morning. This actually helped Spock's skiing standard, but he was determined not to let on to Kirk, and pretended that he was having a lot of difficulty with some of the easier slopes he knew he could now tackle.

One incident which nearly spoiled their leave came when a press reporter had heard, through the grapevine, that the famous Captain James T. Kirk was in Vinotro with his Vulcan First Officer for a ski holiday. He was desperate to get a story and photographs of what this famous pair got up to on leave - what he did not reckon with was the pair of them teaming up to foil his plans.

It was arranged that Kirk give the reporter an interview on the slopes in the morning. What the reporter could not guess was that Spock, who was actually a lot better at skiing than he made out to this uninvited visitor, would have this terrible problem of running straight into the reporter, regardless of how hard the man tried to get out of his way. Eventually he realised that he was unlikely to get a story from this pair, and decided to leave before he developed anything more serious than a few minor bruises.

* * *

On the last evening of their leave it was decided to go to one of the top restaurants in Vinotro, partly as a celebration that they had managed a whole week's skiing without injury - so far, that was - but also to have a quiet relaxing evening before having to go back to all the pressures of their jobs. The restaurant, like the rest of the village, was built in Austrian fashion, serving predominantly European foods, but it did also cater for other races.

After a very large and expensive dinner the two men started to talk quietly over the last week, how they had found the experience, and making plans for the next time they were in the vicinity.

For the last course Kirk managed to persuade Spock to try some of the restaurant's specialities - a local gâteau, similar to Earth's Black Forest gâteau, and a spiced wine.

"You'll love them, Spock. I tried them a couple of nights ago when I was waiting for you to get back from the museum," he explained as he saw Spock wondering how he knew about them. "They might even make you put on those few extra pounds McCoy has been telling you you need."

"If they will put pounds on me I do not think McCoy will be very pleased if they do the same for you," teased Spock, for a change.

"Shut up and just eat," replied Kirk, not wanting to be reminded of the fight he usually had with McCoy when he returned from any leave where he had put on weight.

"It is indeed pleasant," replied Spock after the first mouthful and sip, "although I can imagine the wine being very potent if taken in excess."

"That's what the cake's for, to soak up the alcohol. I must admit I have really enjoyed this leave. I was a bit worried for a while when you changed your mind and came with me, whether this was the right type of leave for us, but I'm glad it's worked out. It makes a change to get away from all the responsibility for a while."

Spock, sensitive to Kirk's mood, relaxed and sat in companionate silence. He too was reviewing why he had decided to come. He had agreed with McCoy that they had all needed to get away from the Enterprise, but was surprised that he had actually decided to take his advice and go on this trip with Kirk, and was even more surprised that he had enjoyed it.

"Jim... Jim, it is time we made our way back to the hotel. We still have to get packed," said Spock, his innate sense of time telling him that if they did not get back soon they would be too tired to do any skiing tomorrow.

"What? Oh, sorry, Spock, I was miles away. Is it time for us to get back?" Kirk asked as Spock nodded an acknowledgement. "I was just thinking, it's unfortunate that all good things have to come to an end, but I'm glad we decided to stay until just after lunch tomorrow. It will give us a chance to do the Glades run. Don't worry - although it's the longest run, it's not too difficult. I'm positive you'll manage it. I skied it yesterday, and would love to ski it again before we go, this time with company."

They slowly made their way back to the hotel, to be greeted by a pleasant surprise.

"Where the devil have you two been? I've been sitting here ages waiting

for you," said McCoy as they walked in the door.

"Bones! When did you arrive? I thought you were spending all your leave with your friend."

"I was, Jim, until an emergency called her away; so after having let you down so badly I decided the least I could do was to give you some real company for a while," he replied, trying to tease Spock, who raised an eyebrow in reply.

"It's great you could join us, even if it is for a short time," said Kirk as he steered both his friends in the direction of the bar for another celebration... and so much for the early night.

* * *

If it could have been at all possible the last morning was the best weather they had had. The careful packing they had planned the previous night turned into a case of throwing the clothes into the bags any old way and rushing, as quickly as a slight hangover would permit, down for a quick breakfast.

After they had paid a visit to the ski hire shop to equip McCoy, who fortunately could ski, Kirk had them heading for the chairlift that would take them to the Glades run.

Spock held back so that McCoy and Kirk could go up in the chair together to give them some time with each other, however short. It gave him a chance to reflect on how much he had enjoyed this form of Terran sport, and to wonder what other sport he could try next leave: he had decided to take some of his accumulated leaves, but not necessarily to spend them all in study and research.

At the top of the run McCoy insisted on teasing Spock about how hopeless he probably would be, and if he actually should attempt to tackle such a difficult run (the top part being the steepest, though gentler than some of the runs he had done on his own.)

"Bones, leave Spock alone. He was doing very well, and will make a really good skier if he gets the practice," said Kirk, with his fingers crossed behind his back at this little white lie. "Come on - let's get going."

Kirk took the lead, McCoy came next, with Spock bringing up the rear. As the run progressed Kirk and McCoy started acting like a pair of schoolboys, and just let loose with their screams, much to Spock's embarrassment. Even though the two Humans were getting a bit carried away with themselves, Kirk did manage to keep their speed down to allow Spock to keep up with them.

About halfway down Spock got fed-up with their antics, and decided he could stand it no longer. He put together what Kirk had taught him, and the confidence he had picked up by skiing the runs Kirk did not know about, and overtook the pair of them. From then on Kirk started to concentrate on Spock's skiing, worried in case he might finally have an accident on their last run, and was silently thankful that they had their own private doctor with them.

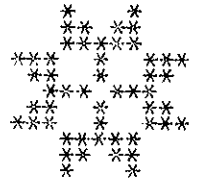
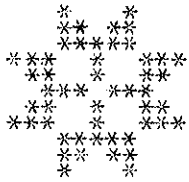
At the bottom, once they had caught their breath from the pace Spock had set, his Vulcan stamina - and no hangover - permitting him to go longer without a break, McCoy commented, "I see out illustrious First Officer skis as well as he does everything else he turns his hand to."

McCoy stood looking down at the white heap at his feet, wondering why Spock had a smug, if you could call it that, look on his face when Kirk had turned suddenly very, very pale - and fainted!

A NEW BEGINNING

by

Liz Butler



The intense dry heat of Vulcan's late afternoon did nothing to assuage the insistent headache that had plagued Amanda for much of the day, and she tiredly rested her forehead against the welcome coolness of the window pane. From this vantage point on the first floor of the spacious house a large expanse of the walled garden could be seen, a garden laid out in a style reminiscent of her native Earth, although the majority of plants were, of necessity, indigenous to Vulcan. Her eye fell on the bed of roses beneath the window, and she smiled in memory of the trouble Sarek had gone to, to have them transported from Earth. She had approved of the garden as it had appeared on her arrival on Vulcan, but Sarek had perceived and appreciated his wife's quite natural, but carefully hidden, yearning for the roses which had invaded every nook and cranny of her former garden on Earth. He had seized the opportunity of her enforced confinement in hospital awaiting the birth of their son, to have a large consignment shipped to Vulcan. He had gone to immense lengths to ensure that the plants were kept in perfect condition during the journey, and had had them painstakingly transplanted and tended with loving care, so that they should be in bloom to greet his wife's return.

Amanda's thoughts drifted back to that day. She had already been in a state of euphoria, travelling home from the hospital cradling her baby son in her arms, and the sight that met her eyes as she stepped through the gate had completely destroyed her self control. The sea of sparkling colour and the heady scent had brought a lump to her throat, and she had turned brimming eyes to her husband, utterly unable to say a single word. But he had understood; as he had always understood her every mood, every gesture; as she had thought he would always understand... until now.

She couldn't state with any degree of certainty when the doubts had begun to formulate, so gradual had been the process. She only knew that she had begun to feel afraid... no, not precisely afraid... more, insecure... since her son's dawning intelligence had made itself felt.

Her thoughts moved, inevitably, to the small, confused being who was Spock. Confused? She sighed regretfully. Yes, her son was confused, and every day she watched helplessly as he fought to come to terms with the fact that he was different from the other boys. What made it worse, strangely enough, was the fact that he didn't look any different. To all intents and purposes, he appeared to be a normal Vulcan child. But he knew, and the other children knew, that his mother was an alien, an Earthwoman; one of that highly emotional and illogical race with whom the people of Vulcan had, only comparatively recently, come into contact.

Whereas the Vulcan people stuck rigidly to their code of cool logic and non-emotion, the children were under so much compunction as far as Spock was concerned, and made no secret of the fact that they despised the 'half-breed'.

To Amanda's dismay, Sarek had made it clear right from the start that he would not tolerate any undue show of emotion from his son. Oh, to be fair, he had always tried to talk to the boy on his own level, and he had made allowances when the child was very small, but Spock was left under no illusion as to how he was expected to behave. Deep down, Amanda understood that Sarek was only acting in his son's best interests; he had to grow up on Vulcan, so it was necessary that he conform to the normal, accepted behaviour of his father's race; but it hurt to watch her son's torment.

Her reverie was interrupted by the raised voices of young children. She craned her neck to see the driveway, and was just in time to glimpse the

fleeing figure vanishing round the side of the house. She looked at the small knot of children pressed against the gate, and their taunts drifted up to her.

"Half-breed!"

"Earth-baby!"

"Go cry to mother!"

"Earther! Earther!"

One after the other they all took up the chant, "Earther! Earther!" until one of them noticed Amanda gazing down at them from the window, and quickly warned his companions. With a brief glance in her direction, the group broke up and went their separate ways, leaving Amanda staring at the empty space, her eyes bright with unshed tears. Closing her eyes tightly against the mounting pain at her temples, she pulled herself together and went in search of her son.

* * *

Spock lay face down on the sofa, his small body trembling as he tried to blot out those ringing cries. Amanda reached out a tentative hand to his shoulder, only to withdraw immediately as she felt his body stiffen in response. The child got hastily to his feet, dashing a hand across his eyes before regarding his mother steadily.

"Spock, does that happen often?"

"It does not matter."

His matter-of-fact tone cut through her like a knife. "Yes it does. Please, answer my question."

Spock sighed. "Quite often."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"It would serve no purpose. There is nothing you can do."

"How do you know that? I could talk to them, make them understand."

"No!" Spock's reply was unusually vehement, and he quickly masked his anguish. "They would not listen to you, you are only..." He stopped, obviously horrified at what he had been about to say.

"Only a Human," Amanda finished for him, quietly, the pain evident in her voice. "Spock... are you ashamed of me?"

Spock stared at her, tight-lipped, suddenly looking much older than his six Earth years.

Grasping his upper arms, Amanda shook him in an effort to get through to him. "Spock, can't you see I want to help?"

Still he remained silent, and she dropped her hands and regarded him dejectedly. "Oh, Spock, what have we done? I'm... sorry... maybe... Spock, would you have preferred a Vulcan mother?"

The child stepped back a pace, an indefinable emotion flitting across his features, before he answered stiffly. "The question is irrelevant. You cannot change what is. Please... may I be excused?"

Her every instinct was to cry out, "No, you may not be excused! Somehow I'm going to get through those barriers and find my son!"

But she didn't. One look at his closed face and stiff, intractable body made her, once again, admit defeat.

"Yes, Spock, you may go. Just remember... if you want to talk,,, or..."

She broke off as Spock ran from the room, staring after him, the tears she had held back in her son's presence now spilling over and running down her

cheeks. Desperately she fought to control the rising sobs, and started involuntarily as she felt hands on her shoulders. As Sarek's warm presence enveloped her, she relaxed against him and whispered, "Oh, Sarek, what have we done?"

Her husband made no pretence at misunderstanding, answering quietly, "We knew it would be hard."

A sob escaped Amada's throat. "Yes... but not how hard. He's so little... and... he doesn't know who he is. He's... so alone. Sarek, what can we do?"

Sarek turned his wife to face him, taking her face between his hands. "There is nothing we can do. Neither of us can understand completely what goes on inside his head. Spock has to work it out for himself. You must see that. It will be hard, I know, but he is intelligent, and has great strength of character. He is a Vulcan, and he will adjust in time."

"Will he? At what cost... to him... to us?"

The question was unanswerable.

* * *

Spock's headlong flight from his mother ended in the sanctuary of his room, where he sank to the floor and knelt, eyes tightly closed, fists clenched, as he struggled for control. Words and images flashed through his mind in a whirlwind of confusion; the children's taunts, his own tears, his father's disapproval, his mother's distress. All became entangled, merging, coalescing, into a raging torrent of conflicting emotions which threatened to overwhelm him. Words came back at him, searing, threatening, pleading.

"Earther!"

"Spock, are you ashamed of me?"

"Half-breed!"

"Would you have preferred a Vulcan mother?"

With a cry of anguish he flung himself forward onto his face, small hands beating, futilely, at the unyielding floor. "I... must control. I am a... Vulcan. '... have to be... Vulcan!"

Gradually the training instilled into him, almost since babyhood, reasserted itself, and the tension and pent-up emotions filtered out of his taut body. Completely spent, he lay on the floor, willing himself to relax. Try as he might, he could not rid himself of the vision of his mother's stricken eyes as he had rejected her attempts to comfort him.

Was he ashamed of her? Would he, in fact, have preferred a Vulcan mother?"

Even as the thoughts formulated in his mind, the answer came back with alarming force. "NO!" It was unthinkable! His mother was his mother.

Deliberately, he contemplated the Vulcan women with whom he had come into contact - the mothers of his tormentors - and tried to imagine any one of them as his own mother. Vulcan women were sedate, controlled, always coolly logical. They never smiled... well, if they did, he'd never noticed. In direct contrast Amanda's beautiful, smiling face swam before his eyes, and, despite himself, he felt a profound rush of... something... deep inside him. He was still too young, too conditioned, to recognise this feeling as love, but he knew with certainty that, given a choice, he would not wish to change anything.

With this knowledge came a strange feeling of peace. Let the other children torment him. His mother was right; they just didn't understand... couldn't understand... what having a Human mother meant.

Again the image of his mother as he had last seen her, hurt and shut out, forced itself into his consciousness, and he vowed somehow to dispel her doubts and fears.

Ultimately, the overload on his senses took their toll, and his body relaxed into sleep.

* * *

Looking down at him some time later, Amanda smiled tremulously, blinking back sudden tears. He looked so small and vulnerable lying there. She bent and gently picked him up, holding him to her for a few precious seconds, her cheek against his dark hair, something Spock would never permit when awake.

"Oh Spock," she thought wistfully, "what am I going to do with you? If you only knew the pain you unwittingly cause me."

With a sigh she crossed to the bed and laid him down. She reached out a hand to smooth the dark hair, and leaned forward to brush her lips lightly against his forehead. With a last look at the child who meant so much to her, she rose silently and left the room.

* * *

Dinner that night proceeded much as usual, with no reference to the painful scene earlier, Amanda pretending not to notice the odd, sidelong glances Spock directed towards her. The air of tension between his wife and son was not lost on Sarek, but he refrained from comment. Nothing he could say would alter the situation; they would just have to work it out between them. He returned to his study after dinner, leaving an uneasy silence behind him.

With Sarek's departure, Amanda relaxed some of the control she had exercised throughout the meal, and lifted a shaking hand to her throbbing head. Spock watched her with a vague sense of uneasiness, and opened his mouth to speak, only to close it again as Amanda rose from the table and moved wearily into the living room. He waited a moment, head bowed guiltily, then summoning up his courage, followed slowly.

Seated in her chair, Amanda looked up at his approach, the faintest of smiles on her lips. "Would you like me to read to you?"

Wordlessly, Spock nodded, his eyes never leaving his mother's face. He settled himself at her feet as she lifted down a book from the shelf. Those books were a source of wonder to the child; real, printed books with beautiful illustrations, and he never tired of listening to the stories which had so entranced his mother when she was his age. He was soon completely caught up in the escapades of Alice in Wonderland, and only gradually became aware that his mother's voice was faltering slightly.

He looked up sharply, and could not completely conceal the shock that assailed him at her appearance, the extreme pallor of her complexion and the lines of pain around her half-closed eyes. Even as he watched, Amanda dropped the book and pressed both hands to her head, closing her eyes tightly. Hurriedly he got to his feet.

"Mother!"

With a supreme effort, Amanda managed to keep her voice steady. "It's all right, Spock. Go and fetch your father, please."

"Mother, what is wrong?" His voice betrayed his sudden fear.

"Please... just do as I say... quickly."

Heart thudding painfully, Spock almost ran from the room, whilst Amanda fought frantically against the waves of blackness that washed over her, stabbing pains shooting through her temples. It was a losing battle, and by the time Spock returned with his father, she had succumbed, and lay unconscious on the floor.

* * *

The next hours held all the elements of nightmare for the small, frightened child. He had watched in amazement his father's momentary panic at

the sight of Amanda lying unconscious on the floor. It had been quickly veiled, but even so, Sarek had hurried across the room to drop to his knees at his wife's side and lift her gently into his arms. Spock would forever remember his father's initial shock, barely controlled, the trip to the hospital, the awkward words of reassurance, the hours of waiting while the doctors determined the cause of Amanda's collapse.

Through it all, Spock sat in unbelieving silence, an illogical feeling of guilt enveloping him. Guilt, and a fear such as he'd never experienced before, as he considered the possibility that his behaviour had, somehow, been a factor in his mother's sudden illness. Was it his fault? If she died... He thrust the thought away from him, panic-stricken. She couldn't die! What would he do?

For the first time in his life he was compelled to contemplate the thought of life without the soothing balm of his mother's presence, and he had to make a conscious effort to still the trembling in his limbs. He sat, ramrod straight, on the bench in the hospital, eyes staring stright ahead, teeth clenched together to stop himself from crying in public.

For what seemed an eternity, Spock waited, alone and more frightened with every passing moment. It was thus that Sarek found him several hours later, and as he stood in the doorway, unnoticed by his son, a wave of infinite tenderness and... yes, love... swept over him. Carefully steeling his features, he crossed the room and dropped to one knee in front of his child.

Spock's eyes focussed on his father's face. "Mother?"

The one word said volumes, and Sarek felt his throat constrict painfully as he raised a hand to stroke his son's hair. "Do not fear, my son. Your mother is recovering."

Spock searched his father's face uncertainly. "She will be well again?"

"Yes, Spock, she will be well, but she will have to remain here for a short time." He stopped for a moment, trying to think of the right words to explain to the boy what had happened, then decided that he was intelligent enough to understand the basic facts. "One of the blood vessels leading into the brain had become blocked. She has had to undergo an operation to relieve the pressure. Naturally, the doctors wish to ensure that all is well, so your mother has to stay in hospital for a few days."

For a long moment the child sat, unmoving, letting his father's words sink in. His mother was not going to die. His father had said she would be well again soon.

The abrupt release from tension shattered his hard-won composure, and Spock buried his face in his hands, his small body wracked with sobs which would no longer be denied. Sarek knelt, momentarily at a loss, then allowed instinct to take over for once and gathered his son into his arms, holding him until the storm abated.

As his tears subsided, Spock detached himself, a little self-consciously, from his father's arms, and brushed a hand across his eyes. "Father, is it permissible for me to see Mother?"

Firmly controlling the unexpected, illogical feeling of loss, Sarek nodded. "Yes, for a few moments. She is still unconscious, but you may go to her."

He got to his feet and ushered Spock into the corridor.

* * *

He sat on the edge of the chair, watching his mother's face relaxed in sleep. He noted with relief that the waxy pallor was rapidly diminishing, leaving her just a little paler than usual. Tentatively, he reached out and laid his hand on hers; at the light touch her eyes flickered and opened, to focus with difficulty on Spock's face.

Her lips curved in a smile of welcome, while she attempted to collect her scattered wits. By slow degrees, the realisation that she was in a hospital bed dawned, and her lips moved to form a question.

Mindful of his father's warning that she needed complete rest for a while, Spock rose and laid a grave finger against her lips.

"Do not try to talk, Mother. Father said I was not to disturb you. Did I wake you? Shall I fetch Father?"

The words were not hurried, but compared with Spock's normal mode of speech he was positively babbling, and Amanda's smile widened.

"Where is your logic?" she teased. "First you tell me not to talk, then you start asking questions. Tell me, how do I answer without talking?"

Spock looked at her uncertainly, then realised he was being teased, and allowed his own lips to form a tiny smile in response. "Shall I fetch Father?"

"In a moment. Just let me pull myself together first."

"Pull yourself... Oh, I see... I think."

Amanda laughed weakly at her son's obvious consternation, and reached up a hand to touch his face lightly. "How long have I been here?"

"Fourteen hours. Mother, are you feeling better?"

Amanda looked into her son's worried eyes, making an effort to pretend not to have noticed the fact that Spock had not moved away from her touch. "Yes, Spock. The pain has gone, but I feel... a little sleepy and rather... light-headed. I think, perhaps, you'd better go and fetch your father now, before I fall asleep again."

"Of course." He turned to go, but some instinct which would not be denied compelled him to hold back and face his mother again. He gazed at her for a long moment, unsure what to say, yet knowing something needed to be said. Amanda lifted a hand towards him, and after a brief hesitation he took it in both of his.

"Mother..."

"Yes, my son?" came the quiet reply. "Is there something you want to say to me?"

Spock nodded, and dropped his eyes to their clasped hands. He started, hesitantly, in a small voice. "Mother... you asked me earlier if I... would have preferred a Vulcan mother."

Amanda bit her lower lip at the memory of that painful episode, and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Spock. I had no right to ask such a question. Please... forget it, and... try to forgive me."

The child forced himself to look up, his two small hands instinctively gripping his mother's hand more tightly. He shook his head slowly. "In view of my behaviour, you had every right to ask such a question. It is I who should apologise and ask forgiveness. I... cannot change. I am... Vulcan, but..." His voice faltered, but he went on bravely. "You are my mother. Nothing can change that... but... given a free choice... I... would not wish to have it any other way."

The last words came out in a rush, and Spock abruptly released his mother's hand and fled from the room. Amanda gazed after him, tears starting to her eyes... tears of sheer joy. No great declaration of love, certainly, but those few words meant more to her than any flowery speech could ever do. Her son did care, and that knowledge brought a great peace to her heart, an inner peace that had so long eluded her.

It was a new beginning.

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TWENTY-THIRD CENTURY DESTINY

Planet of logic and calm, I am drawn to you
Inexorably as any Vulcan is, yet I am not;
A Human, unwise and frail, is what I am;
Still in my heart I yearn to share your peace.

Yet yearning in itself is not your way,
And though it would be difficult, I know
That I could learn the Vulcans' stern control
Of heart and mind, and bring calm to my soul.

The ways of Earth are not the ways for me,
When narrow, blind contemporary Terrans cause
My thoughts once more to turn to you; the world
Where foolishness and cruelty have no place.

I should stand beneath the deep red of your sky,
And watch the silver birds rise in the dawn;
I would learn of logic, learn to order thought,
And of NOME, and join the Vulcan All.

To live on Vulcan, free of heart's turmoil;
To learn your wisdom, best as Human can,
Is not a dream I dream alone, unheard;
For many share my wish to know your peace.

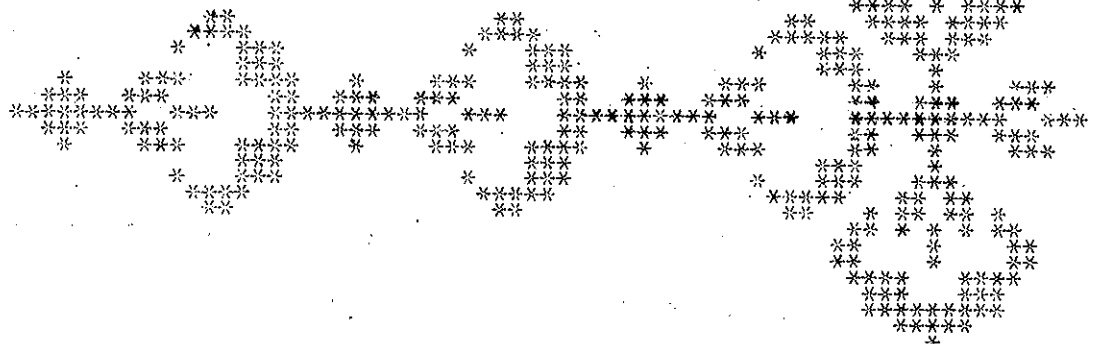
Reality invades my thoughtful mind,
And thrusts itself upon me, saying I
Am born three centuries out of time - but no;
I cannot, will not, think you're but a dream.

For I believe as many others do;
Those who are wise, and take no heed of fools;
New friends out there await the Human race;
For a time when we have learned some part of sanity.

One day the Federation will exist;
The galaxy will hold no bars on us;
Infinite Diversity shall reign,
And all shall know the wisdom that is yours.

But for now, my thoughts to Vulcan turn,
And in my mind I board a great Starship;
Through starlit space I travel, going home
To Vulcan, leaving Earth's sadness behind.

Vicki Richards



GAME OF DECEIT
 by
 Lorraine Goodison

Kirk stood by the innocent-looking piece of ground and sighed inwardly. Barely ten minutes ago a young woman had been standing there, and then... Then she had... vanished.

"That's the place, Captain. Exactly there."

He glanced back to Ensign Barclay, who was obviously trying to remain calm in an attempt to hide her distress. Not that he blamed her for it, poor kid. Her first survey party in only the fourth week of her service aboard the Enterprise, and this had to happen. Within fifteen minutes of their beaming down to the newly-discovered planet, all five of her companions had mysteriously vanished, leaving her alone. It would be surprising if she didn't feel even a little panic.

"Thank you, Ensign. Now, Lt. Frater - you say she just... disappeared?"

Barclay nodded nervously. "Yes, sir. Well, not exactly disappeared. She... she sort of - faded out. She was about to contact you when a yellow circle seemed to light up below her feet, and she vanished."

"Something like a transporter effect?"

Relief showed in her eyes at the one rational explanation offered so far. "Yes, I think it was."

Kirk nodded thoughtfully. "All right, that'll be all for the moment, Ensign. Go over there and let Dr. McCoy check you out, then beam back to the ship."

"Sir."

A familiar light tread approaching from behind told him Spock was there. He spun round to greet the taciturn Vulcan. "Any ideas, Spock?"

"None so far, Captain."

"Didn't think there would be," returned Kirk, "but there's always hope. From what Barclay says about Frater's disappearance, I think a transporter is involved, but of an alien manufacture."

"It seems likely," agreed Spock, eyes on the tricorder readout. "If that is the case, it must be situated some distance from here. The tricorder reveals no traces of mechanoid or humanoid life within its range."

"The ship's sensors show nothing either, not even an energy reading when they disappeared." He stared round at the peaceful surroundings, frustrated anger growing. "Five crewmen disappear without trace, no calls for help, nothing. It's an enigma, Mr. Spock, and I don't like enigmas. I knew there was something about this planet the moment it came into view."

Spock raised one eyebrow slightly, but said nothing. Kirk would not appreciate a comment on unproven 'hunches' at this moment. He glanced back at the tricorder, was about to remark on something, when a surprised shout from McCoy sent them both running to join the doctor.

"She's gone!" exclaimed McCoy, eyes wide with astonishment.

"Gone? Who's gone where?" demanded Kirk, rapidly surveying the crimson foliage about them.

"Ensign Barclay. She just - just vanished!"

"Do you not mean she was beamed up, Doctor?" queried Spock. "Sometimes..."

"I know what I saw, Spock!" snapped McCoy. "And I know the difference between a transporter and something else! Besides, I hadn't even contacted

Kyle yet for beam-up."

"Something wrong, Captain?"

Kirk looked round as Security Chief Baillie hurried through the trees, Lt. Nakamura close behind. "Another disappearance, Mr. Baillie. Continue searching, but stay within close contact."

"Yes, sir. Clarkson's still on her way back. I'll contact her, warn her to be careful."

"Close contact won't do much good," murmured McCoy as the two men left, phasers in hand. "Barclay was right next to me..."

"Then you are best qualified to tell us what happened, Doctor," commented Spock, earning himself a typical McCoy scowl.

"Sure I know what happened," drawled the doctor. "She was standing there, a circle of light glowed beneath her feet, and she vanished. Explain that one, Spock!"

"Bones," Kirk put in warningly. One thing he did not want just now was an out-and-out argument between his officers.

McCoy managed to look contrite. "Sorry, Jim, but it was so sudden - it kinda shook me. There was no sound, nothing. She didn't even have a chance to speak."

"I know. That's what she said happened to Lt. Frater and the others."

"At least this time we have proof that it was a transporter of some kind," said Spock. He handed Kirk the tricorder. "These readings were recorded seconds before Dr. McCoy shouted. They show a small, but marked, energy surge. I can only surmise this planet must be shielded in some way, thus preventing the ship's sensors picking up any signals. Unfortunately, I was unable to trace the source."

"Well, it's a start," murmured Kirk. He squatted down to examine the place of Barclay's disappearance. "Just like the spot Frater was standing on - soft earth, and no sign of platforms or anything else."

"No clues at all," said McCoy, re-packing his medi-kit. "I get the feeling we're being played with."

Kirk nodded in agreement. "Me too - but by whom, and for what reason?"

"Oh, very good! Better than I'd hoped! This might be fun after all!"

The booming, jocular male voice echoed through the thin mountain air, coming from everywhere and nowhere.

"What the...?" began Kirk. He stared about him, trying to pin-point the origin. "Who are you? Show yourself!"

"What, and break a basic rule? Tut tut, you are new to this. I hope you learned the rules."

"Rules?"

"Worse than I thought," commented the voice with a hint of weary resignation. "There's no excuse, you know. The rules are never changed. If you haven't learned them by now, it's your own fault."

"As far as we are concerned, this is an uninhabited planet," replied Kirk, seeing the returning figures of the Security guards through the forest. He made a gesture with his hand, hoping Baillie would see and have the sense to remain where he was. "There is no record of alien life here, no civilisation. Who are you?"

"The Planetmaster, of course!" snapped the voice irritably. "Don't you know anything?" There was a rumble of angry muttering which rolled in the air

like thunder. "I thought the last lot were bad... Why do people insist on dodging the basic training... I hope you know your basic characters at least"

The query caused a rash of puzzled looks among the Starfleet men, and in the shadow of the trees Baillie flicked open his communicator.

"No, I thought not. Oh, for heaven's sake! Well, you will just have to learn as you go along - don't blame me if you can't be bothered to find out... At least the characters should be easy enough."

"Characters?" echoed Kirk, trying to figure out what was going on. "Is this some kind of joke? I demand..."

"Demand all you like - won't get you anywhere. Oh, I think I should simply forget the whole thing..."

Silence fell, and Kirk looked at Spock and McCoy. "What do you make of that?"

"Fascinating," replied Spock, as always understating the obvious.

"Weird is what I call it," McCoy muttered. "Who is that? And what's all this about rules and training?"

About to reply, Kirk was interrupted by the return of the disembodied voice, this time brisk and business-like.

"Right! Enough fooling about. I'll give you the basic rules, and your characters will just have to be invented along the way. More interesting, certainly."

"Now wait just one minute..." began Kirk, anger rising anew.

"Oh, shut up!" rumbled the Planetmaster. "Rule Number One is, no contact with the ship until the game is ended. So your friend there in the trees can give up with his little box."

Baillie looked up from his busy twiddling of buttons in an attempt to cut through the static, then yelped as the communicator grew too hot to hold. It dropped to the ground, glowed red, and disappeared.

"That's better. Now, where were we? Oh yes, Rule Two. No weapons except those I give you, so you can throw away those silly pistol things."

"Will you just..." Kirk interrupted, but the voice rambled on regardless.

"Rule Three - no cheating. Rule Four - never argue with the Planetmaster. I run the game, so what I say goes. I think that covers nearly everything. Any questions?"

Kirk opened his mouth, but Spock beat him to it.

"What is the object of this game?"

"Spock, do you have to encourage him?" hissed McCoy, but Kirk shushed him. He was coming to the same conclusion as Spock: it might be better to humour their unseen host.

"The object is to find your missing friends," the voice informed them cheerfully. "Oh, and to find various treasures and wondrous artifacts along the way."

Resigning himself to the situation - for the moment - Kirk followed Spock's lead. "How do we do that?"

"Use your brains, of course! Really, I do get them sometimes... Now, to the matter of characters. You in the yellow shirt - what's your name?"

Kirk strode forward. Maybe now they would get somewhere. "Captain James T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise, and I..."

"Yes, yes," interrupted the Planetmaster. "You do babble on, don't you? Well, since you're a leader type already, you can be a warrior. The name

doesn't exactly fit... Do you want another one?"

"No... thank you," Kirk answered bemusedly.

"Suit yourself. Hmm... something more is needed, I think."

A green glow appeared around Kirk's waist, finally fading to reveal a long broadsword encased in a worn leather scabbard. It pulled at the belt around his waist, evidence of its weight. No fake, this sword.

"That is the sword Narfleh - last used by the great Warrior Vethru. He cut off many a dragon's head, so be careful - it's sharp."

As Kirk examined the unexpected gift, the Planetmaster turned his attention to Spock.

"Well, well - a ready-made Elf! Splendid!"

McCoy snorted loudly, and Spock's eyebrows lost themselves in his fringe.

"No help needed there," continued the voice. "Elves are tricky enough as it is. Let's see... the other one could be a Cleric, I suppose. Do you know any first aid?"

"I should hope I do!" bristled McCoy. "I am a qualified doctor, and..."

"No magical powers?" the voice enquired hopefully. "No? Pity. Ah well, your problem, not mine. I can't hand them out willy-nilly. Now, as for your red-shirted friends... Oh drat! Why couldn't one of you be small?"

"Small?" queried Baillie. "Is it important?"

"No, but then one of you could be a Dwarf. I do like a variety. Oh well, make the best of what you've got... The tall one is definitely a Warrior type, so he can have a sword."

Said sword appeared at Nakamura's hip, much to his surprise and delight. A long-standing fan of sword and sorcery tales, he found one of his childhood dreams had come true.

"You can be a Wizard, I think."

Decidedly dazed by the whole affair, Baillie jumped as a strange tingling began in his finger tips, spreading rapidly throughout his body. "What - what's happening?" he whispered in disbelief.

"Magic powers," replied the voice succinctly. "Try them out."

Unsure what to do, Baillie shrugged and gestured towards a nearby tree. A ball of orange flame bollowed forth from his fingertips, turning the tree into a technicolour blaze, and Baillie into a nervous wreck. All his Security training had never prepared him for anything like this!

"Careful! Magic is not just for playing with, you know. Now you'll have to wait thirty minutes before you can do anything else."

"I'm not so sure I'd want to," muttered Baillie, staring at the burning tree. He glanced at Nakamura, who was currently examining his sword. "Shiro... remind me not to scratch my head, okay?"

"There! All happy? Good, then we can... Oh, I forgot all about you..."

Ensign Clarkson stared wildly about her, not at all sure she wanted magical powers or anything else. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, the Planetmaster was tiring of his role-creating.

"Oh, phooey - there are quite enough players as it is. I find five are plenty. You, my dear, can be a Damsel in Distress."

The young Security woman disappeared, going the same way as the others.

"Seven to rescue instead of six. Is that all right?"

There was a moment of silence until Kirk realised the words were directed

at him. It was a little difficult conversing with a disembodied voice.

"No, it is not, but I suppose we can't do much about it. Unless, that is, you're willing to let us go?"

"No question of it! You can't back out now."

"Then free my people, and we'll play your 'game'."

"Then there would be no point, nothing to strive for! Oh no, you must find the prison of your friends, or die trying."

"A nice thought to ruminate on," murmured McCoy. "What in hell's name is this, Jim?"

"I'm not too sure, Bones, but our host seems to hold all the aces. We'd better play along until a way out comes up."

The Planetmaster laughed heartily. "That's the spirit, Captain! Now, let's start the ball rolling. Your resident Wizard found a sheer rock face earlier. That is where you begin. It leads down to a cave system which leads to... Well, you'll find out."

Baillie, still wary of using his hands, nodded to his left. "It's through there, Captain. A few yards away."

Kirk sighed and hefted the sword further up his hip. "Well, gentlemen... I suggest we start off as soon as possible - meaning now."

McCoy stared at him, horrified. "You're not seriously thinking of doing what this lunatic wants, are you?"

"As the Captain has already indicated, we seem to have little choice in the matter," put in Spock.

"Oh, sure," muttered McCoy. "Now this group of trained Starfleet officers are gonna chase around a crazy planet playing games!"

"Oh lovely... a little doubt, a touch antagonism... this will be good," the Planetmaster said gleefully. They could almost imagine him rubbing his hands together in delight. "Now off you go. I'll be around, offering advice and making sure the rules are kept."

"I wish that news made me feel safer," Kirk said ruefully. He looked once more at his companions, then strode off, his gait a little lop-sided due to the sword Narfleh.

"This is ridiculous!" growled McCoy, grabbing his medi-kit.

"I concur, but appearances can deceive. I fear our host's rules may be more strict than he has told us."

The doctor tried to ignore Spock's doom-laden words, but he knew the First Officer was right. They could all die in this insane quest, unaware to the end of even the reason behind it all.

* * *

Alien trees thinned out onto a bleak, wind-swept cliff top, the earth slicing down into distant shrubs in an abrupt slide of stone. From their vantage point they could see the richly fertile plateau far below, the sweeping landscape bereft of the trappings of civilisation. Somewhere in that beauteous landscape the Planetmaster waited, and watched.

"I can't see any way down there," Kirk said, lying on his stomach to peer over the edge. The rock fell in a sheer face, devoid of obvious footholds. With the wind blowing about their heads, clutching at clothing, only a fool would attempt a descent without some kind of safeguard.

"The first of many puzzles, I should imagine," Spock commented, looking along the jagged edge. "There is a way down; somewhere. It only remains to find it."

"We'd better split up, save time." Kirk rose, dusting himself off. "Bones, you and Baillie go along to the right there. Nakamura, you come with Mr. Spock and me. If anyone sees a way to get us down there, shout."

Grumbling about the sheer stupidity of it all - and anyway, he was no mountaineer - McCoy walked off with Baillie as ordered.

Progressing slowly as they scanned the cliff edge, Kirk, Spock and Nakamura walked in the opposite direction. There was no telling what might be their aid to getting down, so every part of the ground had to be scrutinised.

After a few minutes of fruitless searching, Kirk took out his communicator and tried contacting the ship. No answer, which was what he had expected, but hope reigned eternal. Slipping it back onto his belt, he gripped the pommel of his sword, withdrawing it slightly.

"A fine weapon," Spock observed.

Kirk grinned. "Maybe so, but I doubt if I could manage to use it very effectively. This Warrior Vethru must have been seven feet tall and built like a brick outhouse."

"Brick outhouse?" echoed Spock in puzzlement. "I must confess to not having heard that expression before, Captain."

"I don't often use it," replied Kirk. "Can't say where it comes from..." He broke off as the communicator beeped demandingly. "Well, well. Our host has allowed us that luxury, at least. Kirk here."

"McCoy. We've found a way down." The doctor paused briefly. "Jim, you won't believe this - it's a rope ladder."

"You're right, I don't, but we're coming anyway. Kirk out."

It took ten minutes to reach the spot where Baillie and McCoy waited, a stout rope ladder stretching between their feet and over the edge.

"Where did you find that?" Kirk asked in amusement.

"It was here, ready and waiting," replied McCoy with an expression of strained disbelief. "Conveniently tied to that tree over there."

"Convenient indeed," commented Kirk, testing the ladder's strength. "Too convenient."

"A trap?" Spock wondered.

"Let's just stay prepared for any eventuality..." He glanced quickly around him. "Mr. Nakamura, you stand guard over there by the tree. Mr. Baillie, would you like to do the honours?"

"That's why I joined the Security Service, Captain," Baillie replied jokingly. He took a firm hold of the ladder, easing himself over the edge. There was a mutter of - "Hope I don't burn through it by accident..." as he went over. The three officers bent as far as safety permitted, watching his progress.

Behind them, Nakamura surveyed the terrain with increasing concern. He could see nothing out of place, yet something... One hand strayed to the comforting presence of his sword, gripping the pommel in relaxed ease. It felt right, somehow, a weight which was part of him. He thought briefly of the Samurai sword his grandfather had bequeathed him, now in his cabin on board ship. Those were the days of swordsmanship...

Guiltily returning from his daydream, he glanced round at the men at the cliff. Mr. Spock was going down now, the Captain's and Dr. McCoy's attention fixed on the ladder. Nakamura was about to look away when he caught a flicker of something between the two officers. His eyes widened as the image thickened, developing into an evil-eyed creature intent on destruction. Why didn't they see it? It was right beside them, clawed hands reaching for the ladder!

Crying a hoarse shout of warning, Nakamura pulled out his sword and ran straight at the demon creature.

"What the hell...?" began Kirk, startled and momentarily confused by the sight of a Security man bearing down on them, sword in hand. Rising from his kneeling position, he was too late to stop Nakamura bringing the sword down in a sweeping arc.

Tempered metal met woven rope, and the rope parted willingly. The blade bit deep into the earth, bringing the Japanese to a sudden halt as Kirk and McCoy lunged to stop him going over the edge.

"You fool! What do you think...? Oh my god! Spock!"

Kirk threw himself down to stare wildly downwards. Nakamura's sweep had only severed one supporting rope, but the sudden easing of tension would have taken Spock by surprise, perhaps making him lose his grip.

Fearful for his friend's safety, Kirk felt a surge of relief as he saw that the Vulcan still clung to the rope, however precariously.

"Goddamit, he's got more lives than a cat!" McCoy said gruffly, the same relief evident in his tone.

Behind them, Nakamura stared, bewildered, at the cut rope. He had seen something - hadn't he?

After a few seconds, Spock took it easy down the last stages, finally arriving at the cave entrance Baillie had discovered. The Security Chief held out a hand to support him, and Spock did not refuse it.

"Mr. Spock, that was too close for comfort."

"Indeed, Mr. Baillie," Spock replied blandly. "As you say, too close."

"Spock! Are you all right?"

Cautiously holding onto the ladder, Spock leaned out a little way to reply to Kirk's question. "I am well, Captain, apart from a grazing of my hands and knees. However, my tricorder is broken."

"Luck of the Irish, Spock!" yelled McCoy.

Spock decided not to reply to that, and settled instead for calling back to Kirk. "Captain! I suggest you look for some other way down. I doubt if the ladder will support any weight."

"Not as it is, Spock. We'll go on, there may be another way down. You and Baillie follow that cave. It may lead to our people."

After Spock and Baillie had disappeared into the cave, Kirk turned to question Nakamura. "What happened there, Mister?"

The shaken Japanese explained as best he could, describing the creature he had seen. He trembled slightly, only now realising how close he had come to going over the edge himself.

Kirk looked to McCoy. "Bones?"

"It's the truth, Jim, I'm sure of it. An illusion of some kind, I guess."

"Right first time, Mr. Cleric!" the Planetmaster boomed, with no sign of his whereabouts. "I did think for a moment we could scratch one Elf, but as I said - they're tricky."

"Is this another of your so-called rules?" Kirk snapped angrily.

"Mine? Oh no - nothing so nasty. No, that came from your adversary. All the best heroes need an enemy."

"How come you forgot to mention that?" McCoy asked caustically.

"It's an accepted facet of the game, my friend! I'm not used to people

who don't even know the basics."

"Okay, okay, so we've started off badly," cut in Kirk. "How do we get down there?"

"That is for me to know and you to find out. Use your initiative. Good hunting!"

"Real mine of information," grumbled McCoy. "We could walk for miles in the wrong direction looking for a way."

"Then the sooner we get started..." Kirk replied briskly. He adjusted his sword into a more comfortable position, wishing it was not quite so heavy.

Nakamura gave up puzzling out what had happened, picked up his sword, and acted as rear-guard as they started off. McCoy glanced round warily, finally telling him to holler if he saw any more illusions. Nakamura assured the doctor he would, but McCoy didn't seem too convinced.

The wind stiffened as they walked, blowing chill tendrils of cold through their uniforms. This high up, snow was more than likely, and McCoy thought longingly of thermal jackets and hot food.

To their right, a vista of reds and purples reached to a far misty horizon, temptingly close, but miles below their feet. On the left the crimson trees marched in silent armies, birds and animals keeping within their shelter, wary of the cliff edge no-man's-land. In the sky, a pale watery sun sank a little closer to the horizon.

After an hour and a half of walking with no let-up in the wind and no sign of an end to the cliff, McCoy finally felt enough was enough.

"Jim, it'll be dark soon. If we're still out in the open without shelter or food..."

Kirk reluctantly came to a halt, continuing to gaze at the jagged precipice. "I know, Bones. It's just... I keep thinking that maybe a little further... We don't know what's happening to Spock and Baillie down there."

"Try the communicator again."

"You know I have. No answer."

"Then let's get into the shelter of the trees at least."

The protecting branches cut out much of the wind, reducing it to a fraction of its strength.

"That's better," McCoy breathed in relief. "Now I can think a little."

Kirk nodded in agreement, studying the pillared trunks. "Difficult to tell which way is best. We'd better see about..."

"Well, I'll be...! Jim, look over there!"

Following McCoy's pointing finger, Kirk's eyes widened as he saw a small cottage emerge from the deepening shadows. Like Nakamura's demon, it materialised from nothing, but this time all three men saw it.

A small smile quirked Kirk's lips as he looked at McCoy. "A present from the Planetmaster, I presume."

"Or a trap," McCoy retorted sourly.

As if in reply to his doubts, the wind suddenly increased, howling through trees bent before it. Ice-cold fingers stung their faces, the first smatterings of sleet slapping wetly against inadequate uniforms.

"I think someone's trying to tell us something!" Kirk shouted above the gale. "Make for the cottage, and hope it isn't another illusion!"

The cottage was solid enough, built of cut logs and a thatched roof, carved

shutters pinned back beside small round windows. From the chimney came a tendrill of grey smoke which was whipped away by the greedy wind. It reminded Kirk of the kind of cottage found in childrens' books, complete with stockpile of wood and a water butt.

They had emerged to the rear of the cottage, and Kirk silently signalled Nakamura to work his way round the other side to him and McCoy. Watching the Security man edge his way along the wall, McCoy wondered if they weren't taking the caution a little too far, and said so.

"If a battalion of Klingons charged out of there with weapons blazing, would you want to face them without even a working phaser? He might have cooked up anything for us."

McCoy grimaced, seeing the point of Kirk's argument. Even an innocent-looking cottage must be suspect in this 'game'.

The Captain sidled round the corner, nodding to Nakamura as he cautiously pushed open the door. Nothing happened, no explosion, no surge of enemies. Nothing but the howl of the wind and the splash of sleet.

"A battalion of Klingons, eh?" muttered McCoy. Kirk shot him an irritated look, but said nothing.

The main door opened into a large room lit by the gentle glow of an oil lamp. Orange flames leapt from logs stacked within a wide fireplace, adding to the feeling of comfortable sanctuary. Ancient ceiling beams were festooned with dried fruit and vegetables, a treasure trove of tools and utensils laid aside as if their owner had only a moment ago stepped outside. A ladder led to an upper platform which was apparently the sleeping quarters.

As Nakamura climbed up to search the platform, McCoy wandered over to the fire. With the door closed, the wind was nothing more than a low moan.

"No-one up here, Captain," called Nakamura.

"I'm willing to bet every historian in the Federation would give his eye teeth to explore this place," McCoy remarked, setting an old rocking chair into motion.

"I guess it has a kind of charm," replied Kirk, curiously approaching a round table set back in the shadows. There were several objects on it, but the light was not enough to see them clearly. "Bones, bring that lamp over here, will you?"

After accidentally touching the heated glass and cursing fluently at it, McCoy gingerly transported the oil lamp to the table. The objects were revealed by the steady glow, three in all.

"Well, well," murmured the doctor, reaching for the gleaming green stone. It filled his palm, winking in the lamplight. "An emerald like this must be worth millions. Wonder where it came from?"

"And what about these?" Kirk said, holding up the others, a gold key and a rolled scroll. "Strange things to leave lying around."

"Maybe our host knows."

There was a burst of laughter. "Of course I do, but you have to find out. You can take two of those objects to aid you in the quest - no more."

Unrolling the scroll to look at the map inscribed within, Kirk looked in the general direction of the voice. "What happens if we take all three?"

"Then you've broken Rule Three, dear boy. I can't be responsible for what happens then."

Captain and doctor exchanged glances. "I guess that answers our question," Kirk said. "Choose two... Will these help us find our people?"

A moment's silence, then - "What...? Oh, were you speaking to me? Well,

they might, or they might not. Depends what you choose. Have fun."

"Have fun..." repeated Kirk through his teeth. "Any more obtuse remarks and I'll... Hell, I can't even threaten him!"

After some deliberation it was decided to take the key and map, leaving the apparently useless emerald. When they turned to leave the cottage, they found a new day was beginning outside. Through the trees a crimson flush stained the sky, and no wind blew to chill their bones.

"Shortest damn night I've ever seen," commented McCoy, glancing uneasily around.

"Expect the unexpected," Kirk replied, unrolling the map. Clearly marked was the forest they stood in, a path and directions conveniently written out in their language. "Been a long time since I followed a map..."

As the three men moved off the forest came alive around them, songbirds greeting the dawn in noisy chorus. A boar-like creature lumbered noisily away from the intruders, startling a flock of orange birds.

Oblivious of the sounds of nature, Kirk concentrated his attention on the mysterious map, convinced now that it was not as easy to follow as he'd first thought. For one thing, the written directions seemed to change every time he looked at them, causing them to alter direction continually. They were led into the depths of the forest, winding through trees and shrubbery which looked disconcertingly similar to each other. The cliff and cottage were far behind, and now...

"We're lost," Kirk announced in disgust, rolling up the parchment. "This damn thing's taking us in circles. We could wander around forever more." He pursed his lips and glared at the trees as if they could somehow help. The sword at his hip was a ton weight by now, but something stopped him throwing it away. Who knew what might turn up next?

Standing to one side as the senior officers talked, Shiro Nakamura blinked and stared distrustingly at the rough grass. He could have sworn... No, probably another illusion like the demon. He was not going to be caught like that again. Dismissing it from his mind, he looked up and saw by Kirk's and McCoy's expressions that they had felt it too.

"Captain, do you feel the ground trembling? Almost... shivering?"

Kirk nodded slowly. "Yes, Lieutenant, I do, and I figure that's as good a reason as any to get out of here. Make for..."

The sentence died on his lips as the earth buckled and heaved beneath them. The soil cracked open in jagged crevasses, rumbling in protest. A cacophony of creaks and breaking branches screeched from the trees as their solid footing tore itself apart.

Staggering on the quivering ground, Kirk lost his footing completely. He rolled down a new-born slope, too dazed to stop himself. At the slope's foot, the earth opened up.

"Jim!"

McCoy's cry was lost in the roar, and Kirk felt himself desperately scramble for safety. His fingers clutched at the crumbling earth, Vethru's sword pulling him over the margin of return. The sky turned head over heels, damp earth raining in place of water... A cold maw opened to swallow him. . James Kirk fell...

"God, no!"

Before McCoy or Nakamura could reach him, the ground snapped shut like a trap.

Phosphorous lichen crawled over rudely-hewn walls, brown water running down to lie in stagnant pools on the passage floor. By the dim green light created by the lichen they could see yet another division in the tunnel - another road to take.

"It's like a damn maze," muttered Baillie, heartily sick of wandering around in this silent, damp warren.

"It would appear so, Mr. Paillie," replied Spock, rapidly calculating which of the three tunnels they should take. As yet he was not unduly worried about reaching the maze's centre, and was confident that mental calculations would bring them to it eventually. However, he did not care for this long separation from the others. Where were they now?

Waiting for the Science Officer to work things out, Paillie glanced sourly back the way they had come. The cave had led directly into this maze, and within a short time they had become enmeshed in the convoluted tunnels. It seemed as though days had passed, but Spock had assured him only two hours, forty-two minutes and eight seconds had gone by. Paillie remained convinced it was longer.

Stifling a sigh, he did a double take as a shadow moved at the corner behind them. Narrowed eyes watching closely, his suspicions were confirmed by another unmistakable movement. Paillie's hand reached for his phaser before he remembered it was inoperative.

"Uh, Mr. Spock - I think we've got company."

Turning to see, Spock caught a glimpse of the hulking figure as it stole round the corner into a deep pool of shadow.

"Interesting. I wonder what it is?"

"Judging by events so far, I don't think it'll be too friendly," replied Baillie. "We'd better move on fast."

"I have determined the left fork is the best route," Spock told him, staring curiously up the passage.

"Then if you don't mind, sir..."

Resisting an urge to push Spock before him, Baillie followed the Vulcan into the tunnel, eyes fixed on the main passage. Even with the phosphorous illumination it was difficult to see clearly, and their pursuer seemed to have a knack of merging with the shadows. He had no idea what it was, but he would bet his next year's pay that it was big, ugly and mean.

Five minutes later Spock spoke in a steady monotone. "Is the creature still with us, Mr. Baillie?"

"Yes. I can't hear it very well, but I catch a movement every now and then. I think it's sneaking closer."

Spock nodded, curious as to what manner of creature dwelt down here. "How near is it?"

"Too close for comfort."

"Ah. Not exactly a precise measurement, but descriptive just the same. I suggest we quicken our pace."

They did so, and the creature followed suit. Pursuer and pursued continued in this way for some distance, the gap between them narrowing. Finally Spock slowed to glance back at the ten-foot hulk of muscle and bone, noting the one eye in its brutish forehead.

"Mr. Baillie, in view of the circumstances, I feel the best action to take now is evasive."

"A feed, Mr. Spock!"

Both men turned and ran, the cyclops roaring in approval as it gave chase. The tunnels shuddered with the force of its tread, all attempts at silence forgotten.

"Oh, lovely... Drama, excitement..." giggled the Planetmaster's voice as an added irritant. "Magician, remember thirty minutes have to pass before you can use your powers again. Think before you act."

//Terrific!// thought Baillie. //Magic powers, and I can't even use them in case we get into worse trouble before I 'recharge'! What kinda place is this?//

He skidded round a corner, almost colliding with Spock. The Vulcan had come to a halt, faced by an impenetrable rock wall.

"A dead end!" gasped Baillie, all too aware of the thundering footsteps coming behind.

"There is a way out, if we had it," said Spock, indicating a key hole cut into the smooth stone. "A door, but no key."

"Terrific."

The cyclops roared as if it knew of the dead end. It slowed its pace, assured of capturing its prey.

* * *

Bewildered and a little disorientated, the newly-appointed 'Hero' stared round at the metal walls either side of him. Last he remembered, he had been on a one-way trip down a closing crevasse. He vividly recalled the pressure of earth on all sides, the sky narrowing to a thin strip above his head. There was therefore no explanation for his miraculous escape - unless it had been an illusion, like Nakamura's demon.

Instead of earth and rock, shining walls stretched in an endless passage to either side of him, hidden lighting in the ceiling providing illumination.

"Never look a gift horse..." muttered Kirk, shrugging. He went to pull his shirt into shape and encountered the hilt of his sword. It seemed to have lost its weighty pull, which was one good thing at least. He looked down, and saw the remains of a smashed communicator at his feet, together with the gold key.

Scooping up the engraved key, he glanced about. "Which way?"

No answer, which was not entirely unexpected. It seemed the Planetmaster's sole function was to berate and annoy them without actually helping in any way. Well, left seemed as good a way as any.

One hand on the sword hilt, Kirk turned and walked purposefully along the sterile passage. No monsters leapt out, no trapdoors opened beneath his feet, but almost sixty yards along he spotted a flaw in the metal. When he reached it he smiled and rubbed his chin in mild amusement. It was a keyhole, set into a smooth metal wall.

"Feels like 'Alice in Wonderland'," Kirk mused, opening his hand to reveal the key. As he had expected, it fitted perfectly, clicking back with a smooth 'snick'. The door swung open, and Kirk stumbled back in amazement as two men hurtled through, one slamming the door behind him.

"An opportune moment to arrive, Captain," Spock said, unruffled as ever.

Kirk retrieved his drooping jaw and collected his wits. "Spock! Mr. Baillie! How... Where did you come from?"

"A maze which led from the cave mouth," answered Spock. "We were about to be attacked by a cyclops."

"Talking of which, sir," put in Baillie, "it's still on the other side. I don't think it's going to give up easily."

As if to add substance to his statement, the wall began to shudder, in concert with the pounding of the creature.

"Explanations later, gentlemen..."

Taking the lead, Kirk started down the passage, only to be brought up short by an invisible barrier. Frowning, he patted the wall of nothing, glancing sideways at Spock. "A force-field of some sort."

Spock ran his hands along and down the barrier. "It appears to extend from floor to ceiling, and wall to wall. I can find no opening."

"Then we go the other way." So saying, Kirk walked off - and got a squashed nose for his trouble. "Ouch! It's here too, Spock."

"Well, of course it is, you silly man!" boomed the Planetmaster's voice. "I want you to stay where you are for the moment."

"Why?"

"Because this isn't supposed to happen."

All three men exchanged glances, Spock's eyebrows on the rise once more. He folded his arms and addressed the disembodied voice.

"May I ask why not?"

"It's not, that's all! Oh, this is too much! This machinery is getting worse. I knew it needed an overhaul... I'll simply have to take a hand in the proceedings."

"Now wait a minute!" interrupted Kirk. "It's not our fault your..."

He was cut off in mid-sentence as the floor opened up beneath his feet. Once again he was falling, victim this time of a metallic earthquake. Below the trapdoor ran a long tube which he slid, bumped and rolled his way down until he fell in a dizzy, bruised heap onto a hard stone floor.

"Ooo..." he groaned, holding his head as he stood unsteadily. A deep rumbling growl assaulted his ears, causing him to look wildly around.

He stood in a stalactite-hung cavern, the slow drip of water echoing bleakly across the rock-strewn floor. At least, at first glance it seemed covered with rocks. When Kirk looked closer, he saw the stones were uncut jewels, heaped in disorderly mounds. Here and there the dull glint of gold showed through the colours, crowns rubbing shoulders with goblets and platters. A treasure-house of untold wealth stored carelessly in an underground cave.

However, what concerned Kirk most was the owner of that ominous growl. From somewhere came the rasp of scales on stone, a strange hiss accompanied by another growl.

The Captain backed round behind a jagged stalagmite, one hand on his sword. Around the corner, right on cue, lumbered a creature straight from fairy-tales and mythology.

It was green in colour, its long scaly body topped by a long neck and a wide-jawed head. Two round, multi-faceted eyes blinked in reptilic splendour, while twenty-foot wings eased up in leathery spreads from the wide back. Kirk watched as a clawed paw casually crushed a pile of rubies, the tail nervously sweeping to and fro.

"Do you like it?" the Planetmaster enquired unexpectedly, making the Enterprise Captain jump. "It's one of my favourites. Sorry it's only a baby, but one has to economise somewhere."

"Only... a... baby..." Kirk repeated slowly, taking in the sheer bulk of the creature. "I wouldn't like to meet Mom and Dad..."

As the baby dragon moved closer, its eyes searching out the intruder, Kirk kept hidden, wishing he had more than a sword to defend himself.

"Three doors, and only one is the way out. The other two hide extremely nasty deaths for you both, should you open them."

"Take the lady or the tiger, is that it?" Baillie remarked dryly.

Spock looked curiously at him. "Lady or the tiger, Mr. Baillie?"

"Uh... it's a saying, Mr. Spock."

"Very appropriate, I must say," the Planetmaster chortled. "However, this particular trap holds an extra bonus. You notice the wall behind you?"

They turned to study the featureless panel, part of the grey box they had landed in.

"It moves," continued the Planetmaster. "It moves, and will continue to do so while you make up your minds which door to open. I hope you're good at guessing..."

A rumble of machinery marked the beginning of the wall's inexorable approach. Spock eyed it calmly.

"It seems we are in yet another predicament."

Baillie nodded mournfully. "Yes, sir, but somehow I don't think the Captain is going to arrive in the nick of time again..."

* * *

Security Chief Baillie was not aware of how prophetic his words could be, or how close Captain Kirk was at that moment. A distance of ten feet separated cave and cell, but the knowledge of that would have done neither party much good.

Within the cave, James T. Kirk was discovering just how dangerous a dragon - even a baby - could be.

"You should have kept the emerald," a familiar voice said lightly. "It would have placated him..."

"SHUT UP!" roared Kirk.

He skidded round a limestone cropping, narrowly avoiding expertly aimed claws. The dragon had already come too close, one slash slicing his shirt and the skin beneath it. Smelling the fresh blood had only excited the dragon more, heightening its eagerness to catch him.

//Of course,// reflected Kirk, // I do have superior agility. He's not built for speed, and especially not in a small cave. But how long can I keep dodging him?//

One eye on the weaving head, Kirk slid the sword Narfleh from its sheath. He was not exactly expert on heroic stands, but it looked as if he would have to kill the dragon to escape. That meant piercing the vulnerable skin between jaw and neck, which also meant getting closer than he would have preferred. What he wouldn't give for a phaser right now...

* * *

//I wonder what it's like, being squashed into a Human-sized pretzel?// Baillie mused gloomily. Once again he was standing by while Spock deliberated which door to open. Once again standing by while danger approached.

The wall was very close now. Six feet away, and closing fast. If he'd been religious, he would have prayed.

"Mr. Baillie... we have a slight problem."

Five feet, and moving steadily onwards.

"A problem, sir?" Baillie detected a note of panic in his own voice.

"Yes. I cannot determine which of these doors is the most logical to open."

Spock looked faintly annoyed with himself, while Baillie raised his eyes to the ceiling.

"Mr. Spock - why don't we just guess?"

* * *

"Aarrgh!" A shout of pain escaped his lips as he thudded against unyielding stone. The dragon hissed, shuffling round to finish off his prey.

Painfully Kirk pulled himself up, wildly looking for his sword. It was gone, buried hilt-deep in a mound of gems where the dragon's tail had flicked it. So much for that idea.

As the dragon lunged he managed to roll away, wincing at the drag on his bruised ribs. Sweat ran down his face, plastering his hair to his skull. Rumbling deep in his throat, the dragon viewed his next meal with interest. He had not been too hungry until this morsel turned up. The chase was giving him quite an appetite, but enough was enough. He moved in for the kill.

* * *

Four feet away, and things were getting tight. Any closer, and there would be no room to open the doors anyway.

"Never thought I'd go like this," Baillie muttered.

"You may not, after all," Spock interrupted, new hope in his voice. "Mr. Baillie, we have forgotten your magical powers. Direct them towards that wall."

"Wall? But..."

"The wall, Mr. Baillie. I will endeavour to slow the wall's progress."

Unsure what to do, Baillie made the same gesture he had in the forest. Nothing happened. He tried again. Nothing.

Three feet away, and Spock was straining to hold the wall there.

"Perhaps... an incantation of some kind!" he gasped.

//Incantation?// Baillie thought in puzzlement. //What in hell...? Oh, here goes.//

Narrowing his eyes in concentration, he directed his hands towards the narrow space and shouted the first thing that came into his head.

"Abracapocus!"

A ball of mystic flame left his fingertips, screeching down the thin passage to burst against the metal. Even as it burned through the wall, Spock and Baillie were running after it, scrambling through the scorched tunnel.

* * *

The scabbard was his undoing, twisting itself between his legs as he ran. A sapphire rolled under his feet, completing the job. He somersaulted into a heap, ears ringing with the dragon's roar.

Then through the roar came a new sound.

Kirk stared in surprise as the wall beside him glowed white-hot, melting as Baillie's firebolt burned through. He rolled away as it burst out, its momentum still enough to hurtle it into the dragon. The creature screamed, and vanished. There was a smell of burning flesh in the air.

Hazel eyes met brown, and a wide grin spread across Kirk's face. "Mr. Spock! An opportune moment to arrive, wouldn't you say?"

"My sentiments exactly, Captain," Spock replied gravely, a twinkle in his eye.

"And Chief Baillie!" Kirk continued. "How are you?"

"Uh - a little dazed, sir," Baillie replied, staring at his hands. They looked normal, which was something of a disappointment, and a relief. Somehow he'd expected them to be singed, at least. When Kirk asked if it was his mystic bolt which had despatched the dragon, he could only nod mutely.

"At least we're together again," Kirk said. "I wonder what's in store for us now?"

"Nothing, if I had my way!" snapped a familiar voice. "You cheated! Contestants are not supposed to help each other."

"Well, since you helped the machinery a little while back, I figure we are about even," Kirk retorted. "Why don't you just forget this game idea and let us all go?"

"Unheard of! No, you must finish the game. Not far to go now, so get on with it, and I can set to overhauling this lot."

"This is getting ridiculous," muttered Kirk, his eyes searching for the entrance to the cave. At last he saw it - a round hole too small for the dragon to have entered.

"It apparently arrived via the transporter light," Spock commented, his thoughts as always on the same wave-length as Kirk's. His Captain grinned briefly.

"Just as long as another one doesn't come to finish off the job." He unbuckled his scabbard, tossing it aside. "That was a lot of use."

The cave remained void of dragons, however, and the men entered the long round passage. Once again Kirk was reminded of Lewis Carroll's book, comparing the tunnel to the rabbit burrow Alice entered.

//If a 60-foot rabbit appears,// he thought, //I'll probably have hysterics.//

More of the lichen-draped walls and ceiling, making their way fairly easy. The walls were close on either side, leaving just enough room to squeeze through, and to bump elbows and knees. It twisted and curved in serpentine winds with no indication of the end. There was a muffled sound which gradually grew louder until Spock finally identified it.

"An underground stream or river," he said. "It is quite close."

Kirk grunted in reply, concentrating on pulling himself under a rock which dipped down into the tunnel. For the next few yards the ceiling did its best to meet the floor, forcing them to go on hands and knees. It was becoming claustrophobic, giving an impression of the tons of rock above pressing down. At length, almost two hours later, it opened out. They had reached its end.

Before them a dark river ran across a wide cave, disappearing under a lip of rock to hidden depths. Above, a curved limestone ceiling; at their feet a sandy bank edged the water. There was no other entrance.

Spock studied the water. "The river would appear to be the only way out."

"I was hoping you wouldn't say that..." muttered Kirk.

Despite their misgivings, there was no other way, and no point in debating the fact. Edging into the water, Spock found the current was gentle, allowing a steady, if unstable, progress across the river bed. Kirk and Baillie followed suite, the latter slipping slightly as his boots slid on a round stone. Baillie's hand dipped into the waist-high water, and spread fingers encountered something smooth which moved away as he grabbed. He called ahead.

"Captain, Mr. Spock. I think there's something else in here besides us."

"Subterranean fish," Spock replied calmly. "Many cave systems have such species."

"Maybe so, but I have a feeling it's something nastier..."

Despite his fears, nothing eventful occurred, and Kirk and Spock reached the ledge without mishap. The Captain bent to peer under the ledge. Water met rock just below, pouring on to an unknown destination.

"There must be a tunnel, which probably leads to another cave. The problem is - can we hold enough air in our lungs to..."

He abruptly broke off, interrupted by a scream of agony from Baillie. The Security Chief toppled sideways, arms flailing as he lost his balance. The water surged and foamed with his desperate flounderings. His head went under water just as Kirk and Spock reached him.

Kirk caught a brief glimpse of a grey, sleek shape which appeared to be attached to Baillie's thigh. Pointing it out to Spock, he grabbed Baillie as he struggled surface-wards, gasping for air.

Spock lunged for the creature, long fingers tightening around the lashing body. Its teeth continued to grin at Baillie's leg, its dull brain intent on food and nothing else. Despite the additional pain, it had to be pulled off, and Spock took a tighter grasp to do just that.

Baillie's feet slipped from under him, but Kirk was there to support him, and Spock was winning the tug-of-war.

Suddenly, with a final explosion of red raw pain, the eel was torn off. Spock cast it away with violent strength. Red blood poured forth to stain the murky waters, and Baillie sagged in Kirk's grip.

Breathing deeply, Spock indicated the rock ledge. "We had better get out of the water. The blood will attract others."

Between them they got Baillie to the shelf, Spock nimbly climbing up to help him out and up. Kirk scrambled out in record time, the touch of something against his boot adding to his speed. The water thrashed, then lay quiet, unrevealing of the terror beneath.

"Interesting," murmured Spock. "A variety of lamprey eel, if I'm not mistaken."

Kirk looked up from his examination of Baillie's wound. "If lampreys gouge out chunks of flesh from a man, then you're not mistaken." He indicated the raw hole, pointing to the serrated teeth embedded in the leg. "It was grinding its way in."

Baillie winced at the thought. Reeling from shock and loss of blood, he attempted some weak humour. "I never knew they could get so attached..."

"Luckily for you, it didn't," Kirk smiled. He examined the wound, the smile replaced by a frown. "That needs attention, and Bones has the medi-kit. Now, if we could find him..."

"It seems unlikely under the circumstances," Spock replied dryly. "In order to leave this cave, we must either take a chance on finding an opening through the tunnel beneath us, or return the way we came. Either way involves risking attack by the eels."

"By now they'll be aware and waiting for us," finished Kirk. "This is some game..." He glared momentarily at nothing, waiting for some comment from the Planetmaster, but nothing was forthcoming. Shrugging, he returned his attention to his companions.

"Before we go anywhere, Baillie needs that leg attended to, and a rest. There is a way out, if we can find it."

Left without medical supplies of any kind, they had to improvise. The remainder of the right leg of Baillie's trousers served as a rough bandage. The bleeding had slowed to a trickle, and Kirk slipped off his belt to hold the pad in place.

Spock raised an eyebrow at this, and the Captain grinned. "Don't worry - Bones was going to put me on a diet starting tomorrow, so they won't fall down..."

With his leg a little more comfortable, Baillie leaned back against the rugged wall, closing his eyes to combat the shooting pain. He sighed, then yelped as the wall imperceptibly moved.

"What's wrong?"

Momentarily forgetting the pain, Baillie answered Kirk's question by pushing at the rock. "It moved."

Shooting Kirk a quizzical glance, Spock put pressure on the place Baillie had leaned against. It gave way a little more, bright light streaming through an uneven crack.

Thinking that now he'd seen everything, Kirk added his strength to Spock's. Inch by grating inch, the crack widened. Finally it swung back of its own accord, revealing a room lined with computer panels.

"A computer!" breathed Kirk. "The centre of all this madness?"

"More than likely," agreed Spock. He crawled through the hole, turning to help Kirk bring Baillie through. The wall snapped shut behind them.

"No return that way," Kirk said ruefully. "Spock do you recognise this set-up?"

The Vulcan shook his head. "It is of alien design, Captain. However, I think I shall be able to decipher the symbols if I can find the main control panel."

So saying, he stood, walking slowly round the four walls. He studied the winking lights and dials for a moment, then stabbed a finger at a button. Part of the far wall slid aside, revealing a small room with console and screen. Confidently he strode through and stood examining the controls.

Kirk was settling Baillie against a wall when a call from Spock made him start.

"Jim!"

Something in Spock's voice made Kirk fear the worst. He ran to the room, unprepared for what he would see.

It was indeed the main control room. Across the far wall spread a large screen and console, and below the screen were marked the words - 'TERRAN UNDER EXAMINATION.' The screen told the rest of the story.

A man was being tortured, lightning bolts of energy striking at his manacled body. He wore Starfleet uniform, and as his head whipped up in anguish they saw it was McCoy.

"Oh my God, Bones! Spock, get him out of there!"

The Vulcan was swiftly examining the panels. "I am trying, but if I do not use these controls properly, his pain may increase instead of decreasing."

"If it goes on much longer, it'll kill him anyway!" Kirk snapped. He stared helplessly at the depicted scene. "Hurry!"

Head down, Spock worked quickly, his mind comparing his knowledge of other computers to this one. It did not take too long to work out, and he reached out to punch in the release sequence.

Kirk stumbled back as a flash of light exploded from the panel, throwing Spock across the room. For a moment he feared the Vulcan was dead, but Spock was moving even as he reached him.

"Booby-trapped," was the answer to his unspoken question. "Someone does not want us to use the panel."



Kirk shot a look at the screen. Somewhere close was a torture chamber, and McCoy might well die there before they could find him. Even now he hung limp, twitching as the energy flared.

"We've got to get in there!" He threw back his head to stare at the blank ceiling. "Planetmaster! I've had enough of your game! You kill any of my crew, and I'll order this planet blasted out of existence. Let McCoy go, do you hear?"

"No need to shout," giggled the infuriatingly mild voice. "However, I can't do as you say. Besides, how can you blast me to bits when you can't contact your ship?"

Kirk was about to reply when Spock spoke quietly from behind him. "Captain, the panel is only set to shock me should I attempt to free McCoy. It is not set to prevent a feed-back of power to its source."

"I take your meaning. Do it."

There was nothing more from the Planetmaster, but finally as Spock worked, a suspicious voice filtered through.

"What are you up to? You're awfully quiet. I don't like it when the Players are quiet. Do you concede the game? Oh answer, please! I hate these strained sil... What in the world...? What's going on? You can't do that! It's..."

"Against the rules?" put in Kirk loudly. "As far as I can see, you've done your fair share of rule-bending yourself."

"Not fair!" wailed the Planetmaster. "Here I am, trying to help, and... Oh my goodness..."

Seconds after he stopped talking, a huge explosion close by rocked the room, shorting the screen and controls in a series of crackles and sparks.

Kirk looked at the First Officer. "Remind me to call you in next time we need to demolish anything..."

Spock managed to look apologetic and smug at the same time. "I gave no guarantees as to the effects of such a reverse power surge."

Kirk was about to reply when a startled cry from Baillie set him hurrying into the larger room. Emergency lighting had replaced the normal lights, leaving him just enough light to see that part of another wall had slid open. Through the opening a battered figure stumbled into his arms.

"Goddam... machines... never could depend on them..." McCoy gasped, shaking from the energy shocks. He leaned heavily on Kirk, sliding into a heap on the floor. "Damn thing was... killin' me one minute... let me go the next..."

"You can thank Spock for that," Kirk smiled, reassured by the gruffness. It looked as if Bones was going to be all right. "He blew the computer up."

McCoy blinked at him, surprise in the blue eyes. "Blew it up? Not like Spock... What did he do - lose his temper?"

"Something like that..."

"Well, well." Now that his strength was returning, McCoy could begin to take in his surroundings. He stared at the mess Kirk was in. Wet clothes, cut on forehead, torn tunic and blood-encrusted slashes on his chest. "What happened to you?"

The Captain shrugged. "I got in the way of a dragon." At the look on McCoy's face he raised one hand. "No, don't ask... Baillie is hurt - he was bitten by a lamprey eel, or some close relation."

"Never rains but it pours," muttered McCoy. He eyed Spock. "Well, what's wrong with you?"

One eyebrow lifted. "As far as I am aware, Doctor, I am in perfect health."

"Figures..." McCoy grumbled. "Everyone else is nearly dead, and you come out of it with a wet uniform. That guy said Elves were tricky."

"An astute observation," replied Spock, "if somewhat inaccurate."

"In what way?"

"I am not an Elf, Doctor..."

Their conversation was interrupted at that point by a low swish as another hidden room was revealed behind a wall in the control room. From there a small, four-foot tall alien entered.

He was an unprepossessing figure, dressed in a garish skin-hugging suit of pink and blue. His skin was a light orange, long drooping ears reached down to his round shoulders.

"The Planetmaster, I presume," Kirk said, faintly amused by the strange little alien.

Round doe eyes sadly met his, and long three-fingered hands wrung themselves in anguish. "Yes, that's me, although there isn't much to be Master of now." He glared at Spock. "It was very unfriendly of you to do that! Elves are a perfect liability sometimes."

"Unfriendly!" exploded Kirk, giving his anger full rein. "Mister, if I don't get some straight answers within the next few seconds, I'll show you how 'unfriendly' we can be! Where are my crewmembers?"

"They're all right..." he muttered dismissively, changing his tune as the angry Captain stood over him. "Uh, that is - they're fine, really! Quite safe! I opened their cell doors, and they should be along any minute now."

The hand-wringing increased, and he visibly quaked, but Kirk steeled himself against feeling sorry for this pathetic specimen. His tone deceptively calm, he hunkered down to look the alien in the eye.

"Okay... that's a little better. Now, I think you owe us an explanation. Let's begin with the reasons for this game of yours."

The Planetmaster regained some courage from somewhere, and squared his chin defensively. "I was only doing my job. I was stationed here some years ago by my people, the Lethandri, to run this gaming centre. Every so often, contestants arrive to take part in the quest. You spoiled it by not knowing the rules, and you finished much too soon. If you had gone under the rock arch, you would have found treasure and a pleasure dome of slaves willing to please you in every way."

"If we weren't eaten alive first, that is," retorted Kirk. "What kind of people would willingly walk into certain death for the sake of a few jewels?"

"Oh, the rewards are far greater than that," the alien replied smugly. "You see, we Lethandri live for adventure, games, sport. What greater challenge than this? Sometimes criminals are sent too. If they win through, they are free. Very few make it... That's what I presumed you must be. Aliens who had done something wrong on Lethandra."

"We are not criminals," Spock told him firmly. "We have not even visited Lethandra."

"No?" He frowned in puzzlement. "Then who are you?"

"Representatives of the United Federation of Planets," Kirk explained, arms folded. "We were surveying this planet when you appropriated our landing party."

"Oh dear..." The large eyes looked from one to the other, realisation dawning. "Then you... Then I... Oh my... We've tried to make contact with you so often, and now... I... I have messed things up, haven't I?"

"For want of a better description - yes," McCoy said dryly.

"Uh - Captain Kirk?"

Kirk spun round to see his missing crew men and women emerge from the room McCoy had come through. All eight were there, all unharmed, if a little puzzled.

Kirk smiled in relief, and turned his attention to the Lethandrian. "That's a step in the right direction. Now - our communicators."

"They are working, Captain," said Spock, handing his to Kirk.

"Good. Let's get out of this madhouse..." He flicked open the small box. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Captain!" filtered back Scott's surprised voice. "Where have ye been? We couldna' trace you wi' the sensors, an' some kind of screen prevented the communicators..."

"Yes, yes, I understand, Scotty," Kirk cut in hastily. "I'll explain as soon as we're aboard. That's thirteen to beam up."

"But Captain..."

"Scotty, just beam us up - please!"

* * *

Transporter Rooms One and Two were activated, coordinates set and energy transferred. Kirk stepped from the podium with a sigh of relief. It felt good to be back.

Scotty practically leapt on him, so anxious was he to find out what had happened. However, he was not to find out just yet. Kirk waved away his questions with a tired smile.

"Scotty, if you don't mind, I'll tell you later. Right now, there are some injuries to tend, and I for one need a bath. Put the 'Planetmaster' here in the brig."

As Scotty bemusedly ordered Clarkson and Nakamura to take the Lethandrian away, the tiny alien glared up at Kirk.

"Hey! Who's going to pay for the damage your Elf did?"

Kirk closed his eyes against a wave of murderous intent. "Scotty... get him out of here..."

McCoy whistled as he looked around him. "I never thought I'd be so glad to be transported up." He clapped one hand on Baillie's shoulder. "Baillie, you and me are gonna limp together to Sickbay and get that leg seen to. Oh, and a certain Starship Captain had better come along too."

"Bones, it's only a few scratches," protested Kirk, but the determined look in McCoy's eye put paid to any ideas of dodging the issue.

The doctor eyed Spock severely. "Spock, you go and change out of that damp uniform. All I need now is a Vulcan with pneumonia!"

The eyebrow arched upwards. "I would not presume to do otherwise, Doctor."

"Hah!" As he and Baillie hobbled through the door, he called back to Kirk. "You too, Jim. Doctor's orders."

Shrugging mentally and exchanging a rueful glance with Scott, Kirk meekly followed. A sudden thought came to him that perhaps McCoy had forgotten the diet. Maybe he should guide the conversation in other directions.

"Mr. Baillie, do you still have your magical powers?"

"To tell the truth, sir, I'm frightened to test them out!"

"Mmm. I think you'd better -- just in case."

Grimacing in anticipation of a fiery holocaust, Baillie muttered and gestured. Nothing happened. The look of relief on his face was almost comical.

"Pity," remarked McCoy. "It could have been handy, having a Wizard around the place."

"How so, Doctor?"

"Well... for makin' things disappear." He stared pointedly at Kirk. "Your waistline, for one!"

"Aw, Bones..."

"And then if the warp drive broke down, you could have powered the ship with a few mystic incantations..."

Expounding on the virtues and uses of magic powers, the doctor slowly made his way to Sickbay with Baillie and Kirk in tow. Listening to his friend, Kirk reflected that it was just as well Spock had blown up the Planetmaster's computer. At least there would be no more trouble of that nature.

* * *

Down in the brig the Planetmaster looked mournfully at his surroundings. He did not blame the Captain for his caution, but he might have chosen a better confinement area. Glancing round to check the guard was looking away, he flexed his fingers. If he had his computer it would be easier, but raw power would have to do.

Ten minutes later, as the Security Guard took a look into the cell, he gulped in astonishment. The plain grey metal was strewn with bright flowers, and the orange alien sat amongst cushions and plates of fruit.

Noting the astonished stare, the Planetmaster smiled brightly. "Ah, there you are! Do you like it? Quite an improvement, I thought."

"Uh... yes..." The guard took another long look and retreated to the wall comm. He had a feeling the Captain should know about this...



To Find A Home

How long had I been searching
Without knowing it?
Without knowing for what I searched?
Not until I saw him standing there
Did I realise my search had ended.

He was the star around which
The planets sailed and shone and lived.
The star named - Kirk,
Within his universe Enterprise.
I, and his crew, the planets,
Drawn to him, gravitated
By his charisma, his strength, his...uniqueness.

From that day onwards
My life became a wondrous thing,
For I had found what I had spent
My life searching for.
Love grew in time and I cared not
That that fact went against all my heritage.
It was more than...logical.

I had found a brother,
One who accepted me for who and what I was.
He wanted no pretence or falseness.
He simply wanted me to be myself.
He had not let the earth get in his eyes
As so many others had.
I realised I had finally come...home.

Karen Hayden.